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THE MYSTERY

OF THE BURNING BUSH.

THE MYSTERY

OF

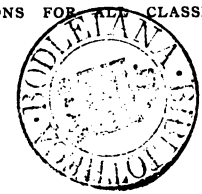
THE BURNING BUSH,

And Other Sermons.

BY

T. M. MORRIS, IPSWICH,

AUTHOR OF "SERMONS FOR ALL CLASSES," ETC.



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I.

The Mystery of the Burning Bush.

EXODUS iii. 1—6.

"*NOW Moses kept the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian: and he led the flock to the backside of the desert, and came to the mountain of God, even to Horeb. And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush; and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed. And Moses said, I will now turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt. And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moses, Moses. And he said, Here am I. And he said, Draw not nigh hither; put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground. Moreover he said, I am the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. And Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God.*"

WE have here an account of what we may speak of as *the Mystery of the Burning Bush.* We look, and behold! there is a bush burning, and yet the bush is not burnt. There is the most fragile and destructible of material, subjected, apparently without reserve, to the action of the most destructive of all elements, and it remains

not merely undestroyed, but uninjured. There is a mere thorn-bush of the desert, scorched by the sun, ready for the burning, in the midst of inextinguishable flames, yet has the fire no power to consume a single twig. Here we have burning fire brought into contact with dry brushwood, and, to our unspeakable surprise, the fire gains not its accustomed victory.

Let us "now turn aside" for a little while, "and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt;" and if the Lord see us, as He saw Moses, turning aside to see, we may hear, what Moses heard, a voice, the voice of the Lord out of the midst of the bush, unfolding to us, in some degree, at least, the significance of this great and confessedly wonderful sight.

Before, however, we more particularly consider the mystery of the burning bush which Moses saw in Horeb, as he was keeping Jethro's flock, we must glance at the course and current of providential events in connection with which this incident occurred.

From the time that Joseph disappears from our view to the birth of Moses, we have a long interval of silence on God's part, and of sorrow and suffering on the part of God's people. We are told in the first chapter of this book of Exodus, in the simplest, briefest way, how it was they were reduced to such a miserable condition: "And Joseph died, and all his brethren,

and all that generation. And the children of Israel were fruitful, and increased abundantly, and multiplied, and waxed exceeding mighty, and the land was filled with them. Now there arose up a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph; and he said unto his people, Behold the people of the children of Israel are more and mightier than we. Come on, let us deal wisely with them, lest they multiply, and it come to pass that, when there falleth out any war, they join also unto our enemies and fight against us, and so get them up out of the land. Therefore they did set over them taskmasters to afflict them with their burdens; and they built for Pharaoh treasure cities, Pithom and Raamses. And the more they afflicted them the more they multiplied and grew."

The mass of the people seem to have been almost utterly demoralised by their servitude, and the few godly people among them who kept alive the remembrance of God's name, who maintained, as well as they were able, the simple forms of worship which they had been taught by their fathers, and who were still clinging to the hopes inspired by the covenant into which God had entered with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—these must have been hoping almost against hope, daring scarcely to look for the vision for which they were professedly waiting, but which had tarried so long; they must have

been questioning among themselves whether the Lord had not forgotten to be gracious, whether the long, dark night of their affliction and servitude should ever be succeeded by the bright morning of a joyful and triumphant deliverance.

But the Lord, through all those weary years of waiting, had not been blind to His people's misery, nor deaf to their cry. There was a "needs be" for them to pass through the iron furnace of Egypt, just as, afterwards, there was a "needs be" for the rough discipline of the desert pilgrimage. They were called to suffer nothing unnecessarily. However painful to them, however obscure to us, we may be sure that there were purposes to be served by these particular methods of the Divine procedure which could not have been so well answered, or, perhaps, which could not have been at all answered in any other way. The moment the appointed time of silence is past, the voice of God is heard; there has been a long season of apparent inaction on God's part, that is followed by a glorious display of His gracious and victorious energy. As for God, His way is perfect, though not always, to us, intelligible. He may, as here, keep His people waiting, but He is not less punctual than faithful in fulfilling His promises: "He never is before His time; He never is too late." God told Abraham (Gen. xv.) that his seed should go into a strange land; be

slaves there ; that the people of that land should "afflict them for four hundred years," and that afterwards they should come out with great substance. When the four hundred years had run their course, God, according to His promise, appeared for the deliverance of His people. "Man's extremity" proved "God's opportunity ;" and the Lord showed that He was not slack concerning His promise as some men count slackness.

God appears for the rescue of His people by raising up one who shall be instrumental in effecting their deliverance. The man who was thus raised up for the accomplishment of this—a greater work than has been ever entrusted to mortal hands—was Moses.

We are familiar with the story of his life. We know how, by the faith of his parents, he was saved in infancy from threatening death ; how he became the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter ; and how, trained and educated in the court of Egypt, he became possessed of all the wisdom of the old world. We know how, when he came to years, he espoused the cause of the children of Israel, "refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season ; esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt, for he had respect

unto the recompence of the reward. By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king, for he endured as seeing Him who is invisible."

Here, in Moses' departure from Egypt, just as he had reached the very prime of his life, we see God working not as man works. We should have said that Moses could have most effectually promoted the interests of his oppressed brethren by continuing in the court of Egypt, and by using in their behalf the influence he could so easily exert as the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter. But while the material condition of God's people might have been thus ameliorated, God's grander and more gracious purposes concerning them would not have been accomplished. God's purpose was that they should go forth from Egypt, and they would have manifested but little willingness to do this, had their circumstances in Egypt been rendered more pleasant and favourable. The work which the Lord has for Moses to do is not to better the condition of the children of Israel in Egypt—that would be but a small thing to accomplish ; he has to lead them forth from Egypt as an emancipated people ; a nation which is to be the Lord's own—a people in whom, by means of whom, all the nations of the earth are to be blessed.

This is a great work for Moses to do—and he

must be carefully trained and properly equipped for it. The first part of his training he received while in the court of Egypt; the second, and, perhaps, not less important part of his training, he received in the desert solitudes of Midian, and while engaged in a simple pastoral calling. As Moses was especially trained for the doing of this great work, so when the time for its actual accomplishment drew near, he was specially called. Till he received this call he probably had no idea of the high destiny which was in store for him, or the arduous work which was to be entrusted to his hands. As David when he was keeping his father's sheep in Bethlehem but little thought that he was being trained for the kingly oversight of Israel, so Moses, when he watched and tended Jethro's flock in Midian, as little anticipated the time when he should become the leader and commander of God's people.

The call of Moses was scarcely less remarkable than the work to which he was called. One day, at the close of his forty years' sojourn in Midian, he led his flock, in search of pasture, as far as Mount Horeb, and probably some way up its side. As he was watching his flock, his attention was attracted by one of the thorn-bushes of the desert, which was evidently burning, and, yet—this was the marvel—though the fire had kindled upon it, though it seemed to be enwrapped in flames, it was not consumed, it was not in the act of

being consumed, the bush remained the same, uninjured, unaltered. Moses is filled with surprise, and he says, "I will turn aside and behold this great sight, why the bush is not burnt. And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moses, Moses. And he said, Here am I. And He said, Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground. Moreover He said, I am the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. And Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God. And the Lord said, I have surely seen the affliction of My people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows; and I am come down to deliver them out of the hands of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey; unto the place of the Canaanites, and the Hittites, and the Amorites, and the Perizzites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Now therefore behold, the cry of the children of Israel is come unto Me, and I have also seen the oppression wherewith the Egyptians oppress them. Come now therefore, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth My people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt."

This is a great marvel. We cannot explain it, and we should not attempt to explain it away. In seeking to unfold the mystery of the burning bush, we cannot get much beyond what we are here told: the bush though burning was not burnt, because the Lord Himself, the great I AM was there.

In looking upon this great sight, it should be regarded by us not only as a wonderful fact, but, also, as an instructive symbol, the significance of which we may well seek to ascertain.

In considering then this mystery of the burning bush, we shall notice

I. WHAT IT WAS DESIGNED TO TEACH MOSES.

II. WHAT IT IS STILL ABLE TO TEACH US.

I. *We have first to ascertain* WHAT THIS BURNING BUSH WAS DESIGNED TO TEACH MOSES. We may safely assume that it was not a meaningless marvel—but a significant symbol; and interpreting Scripture by Scripture, comparing spiritual things with spiritual, we are able to say at once that the fire which Moses saw *was designed to symbolise the Divine presence*, it was the means of making him aware that God was there, and there with the purpose of holding communication with him.

Under the Old Testament dispensation it was generally in connection with some visible display of light, fire, glory, that God made known His

presence to those favoured ones to whom He vouchsafed special communications of His will. The idea of God which ultimately became familiar to the Hebrew mind was this,—God invisible, unapproachable, yet condescending to make Himself known by means of some moderated manifestation of light and glory. One of the earliest and not the least remarkable of these manifestations was that which was vouchsafed to Moses on Horeb, when the Lord called him to the great work of emancipating the children of Israel.

But why was this fire made to kindle upon this thorn-bush of the desert? A manifestation of glory apart from that bush would have been enough to attract the attention of Moses, and symbolise to him the presence of the great I AM. Why was this bush enwrapped with radiant flames, and though burning yet not burnt?

It was a wonderful sight. We need not be surprised that Moses turned aside that he might examine it more carefully. There was no need of any very fierce fire to consume the bush. In a climate and region like that it must have been ready for burning, and yet, subjected to the action of burning fire, the bush was not consumed, was not even injured!

We cannot doubt this wonderful sight was designed to exhibit to Moses *the miserable condition to which the Israelitish people were at that*

time reduced, and the secret of their remarkable preservation, and a most exact and appropriate emblem it was. There they were enduring untold sufferings in the iron furnace of their affliction and servitude in Egypt. This dwarfed stunted thorn-bush, with the fierce fire kindling upon it, apparently devoted to destruction, fitly represented the condition of these Hebrew slaves, nothing but a miracle could save the thorn-bush from the action of the destructive fire; even as nothing but a miracle, one long-extended miracle, had kept the children of Israel in existence as a distinct people. They were hopelessly in the power of the then mightiest nation in the world; they were both disliked and feared; their burdens were heavy and their sufferings were great; but they were not consumed; they were not destroyed. We are told, indeed, that the more their enemies afflicted them the more they grew and multiplied, and when the purpose of God was answered by this discipline then it ceased. When things were at their worst, then God appeared in fulfilment of His promise.

It was a mystery that the bush was not burnt. Moses turned aside to discover, if possible, the reason. The voice which came out of the midst of the fire, and declared "the good will of Him that dwelt in the bush," was the explication of the mystery. The bush was preserved unin-

jured by the presence and power of the great I AM. The preservation of Israel in Egypt could only be explained in the same way. There was the bush, the mere thorn-bush of the desert, than which nothing could be more easily consumed; there were the flames of Egypt's furnace, more than able to accomplish the work of destruction; yet the bush was not burnt, for the Lord was in the midst of it.

Such were probably the ideas more immediately suggested to the mind of Moses, by means of this mystery of the burning bush. It awakened his attention; the voice which proceeded out of the bush assured him that it was a supernatural, a Divine manifestation; that visible splendour with which afterwards he became more familiarly acquainted was the symbol of Jehovah's presence; He, the great I AM, having come on this occasion to call Moses to the work for which He had been so long preparing him. The glory, the fire, viewed in connection with the bush on which it kindled; the bush burning yet not burnt; that was a symbolical representation of Israel's depressed and suffering condition, on the one hand, and the secret of Israel's wonderful preservation on the other.

But besides these special communications which were more directly addressed to Moses, and which were so appropriate to the circumstances in which God's people were placed at

that time, this *burning bush* has a message for us also; it serves to illustrate, even if it werenot expressly designed to teach, several important truths.

II. *Let us then notice* WHAT THIS BURNING BUSH IS ABLE TO TEACH US.

We see Jehovah Jesus here. He was the angel of the Lord in the bush. Stephen in defending himself before the Council alluded to this wonderful transaction, and seems to have had no doubt in his mind as to who this angel of the Lord was. We surely do not err who thus see in this mystery of the burning bush the sign and type of the Messiah, our Divine Redeemer:—in His human lowliness the thorn-bush of the desert, the "tender plant," the "root out of the dry ground;" in His Divine glory the flame in the bush. What a wonderful combination was that! dry wood—consuming flame; the humble thorn-bush of the desert, and the radiant glory; fitting illustration of Him whose name is Wonderful, and who combined in His own person all the sinless imperfections of our frail humanity, and the might, and power, and glory of the Godhead. The bush and the flame, the lowliness of the one and the majesty of the other. The Child born, the Son given, is the everlasting Father and the Prince of Peace.

This vision of the burning bush not only sheds a light upon the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, it serves also to exhibit Him *in His unparalleled*

sufferings, and His unconquerable and victorious might. What do we see? We see Him who in His human lowliness may be likened to the desert thorn-bush—a root out of a dry ground—exposed to what seems to be the destructive force of affliction's furnace, heated many times beyond its wont. All the adverse powers of earth and hell are brought to bear upon One who appears to be nothing more than a weak and unprotected man. We can form no conception of what our Saviour had to brave and endure throughout the whole period of His earthly ministry. The bush seemed given up without reserve to the fiercest action of the fire, but the bush was not consumed,—fragile, destructible as it seemed to be, and apart from the indwelling Divinity would have been, it stood unharmed. For a while the fire seemed to have gained the victory over it; both friends and foes thought it had become at last its unresisting prey—but it was not so. Christ died, was buried, but He rose triumphant over death and the grave; the confederate powers of earth and hell were unable to effect their purpose, and over again we see enacted, but on a sublimer scale, the mystery of the Burning Bush—burning but not burnt.

If we will but turn aside to behold this great sight, we shall see even more than this. We have already remarked on the fact, that it served to exhibit to Moses the depressed and suffering

condition of God's people in Egypt, and the secret of their preservation. *It is also the abiding sign and type of the condition of God's Church in the world,* which we see exposed to what threaten to be destructive influences, and yet preserved unharmed. The continued existence of God's Church in a world like this is a standing miracle, not less—we may say much more—wonderful than the marvel which Moses saw in Horeb, the bush which, though burning, was not burnt. Over and over again has the Church seemed devoted to destruction; both friends and foes have felt that it must perish; but no! though as compared with the adverse influences brought to bear against it, it is, considered in itself, but as the frail bush of the desert, it has survived every assault, and it remains, as it ever will remain, unharmed. The secret of its continued existence and safety is the simple, but sublime fact, that the Lord Himself is in the midst of His Church.

The more we dwell upon this fact of the continued preservation of the Church, the more completely we realise what is involved in it, the more wonderful must it appear. The Church, regarded in itself, may be fitly compared with the thorn-bush of the desert; it is not more highly esteemed by the world than was its Divine Head; it is accounted as a root out of a dry ground, without form or comeliness, yet associated with it, in itself so lowly and insignificant, we have the

divine glory; the Lord Himself is in the midst of His people, and this explains why the bush is not burnt; the fire may rage, but it is powerless to consume.

The mystery of the burning bush admits of a personal, an individual application. What is true of the Church regarded as a whole, is true of every individual member. Here is one, who, in himself, is able to brave and bear but little; many fierce burning influences are directed against him; the blended flames kindled by the world, the flesh and the devil, blaze around him; he is exposed to the scorching heat of fiery trials and afflictions; we look on, and it seems to us as though the bush must be burnt: but no! to our surprise the bush remains unharmed. Do we, with Moses, ask why the bush is not burnt? The answer is not far to seek, it is because of "the goodwill of Him that dwelt in the bush."

Frail in ourselves as the thorn-bush of the desert, exposed on every side to adverse and destructive influences, do we feel that we are safe—safe for time—safe for eternity? Let us remember that Christ dwelling in our hearts by faith is the secret of our safety. This continued and inviolable security in which it is our privilege to rejoice, we owe to God's grace, the Saviour's merits, "the goodwill of Him that dwelt in the bush."

II.

On Pleasing Ourselves.

ROMANS XV. 1—3.

"We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let every one of us please his neighbour for his good to edification. For even Christ pleased not himself."

TO PLEASE ONE'S SELF! This surely is not a very lofty or laudable object of ambition, yet this is that which nearly every one is trying to do, but which very few succeed in doing. We should scarcely expose ourselves to the charge of exaggeration if we were to say that the "mass and multitude" of human kind are engaged in a laborious but ill-requited attempt to please themselves. With a great variety of method—going forth in almost every conceivable direction, they are busy in the same unavailing pursuit. With such every line of life centres in self. The final issue and outcome aimed at in all practical endeavour is self-gratification. They never look beyond—they never rise above self: their only fixed principle is a settled determination to please themselves.

Since, then, we may not unfairly regard *self-*

gratification, in some one or other of its many forms, as the great object of human desire and pursuit, it will not be out of place for us to consider what, it is to be feared, receives too little consideration — the great subject of *pleasing one's self*.

This is a matter which receives large and varied treatment in the Scriptures, both of the Old and New Testament; and in the Epistles of the New Testament especially, we are taught that that desire or determination to please one's self, which is productive of so much ill-feeling and misery in the world, may and not unfrequently does, prove a most fruitful root of bitterness within, what should be, the sacred and peaceful inclosure of the Christian Church. Human nature repeats itself; and the Apostolic admonitions, in reference to this most common and mischievous tendency, which were necessary more than eighteen hundred years ago, are not less needful to-day.

We see by a glance at the context that it is with a particular expression of this tendency to please ourselves, that the Apostle here deals. In reading this and the other Epistles of Paul, we should bear in mind that they were all written with a special purpose, and deal with problems which were, at that time, demanding solution in almost every Christian community. When these letters were written, in the great

centres of ancient civilization at least, Christianity was just beginning to attract attention to itself. Looking at what they accounted a novel and rising heresy, men were beginning to ask what this thing might mean, and whereunto it would grow. All converts to Christianity at that time, passed over immediately from Heathenism or Judaism to the New Faith, and had to pursue their Christian course, in the midst of a Jewish or heathen population. This being the case, we can easily understand that many very difficult and delicate questions would arise as to the proper regulation of Christian life. Obliged to sustain manifold, and sometimes very intimate relations to the heathen on the one hand, and the Jews on the other, it must have been often very difficult for them to determine what position they should occupy,—what attitude they should maintain as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ; and we cannot but notice how largely the Epistles of Paul are occupied with questions arising out of the peculiar circumstances in which many of the primitive Christians were placed.

In the latter part of this Epistle to the Romans we see the Apostle dealing with such questions. The Church in Rome was made up partly of converts from Judaism, and partly of converts from Heathenism, and considerable differences of opinion prevailed among them, as

to the observance or non-observance of certain days, and as to the eating or abstaining from meat which had been offered to idols. The different views taken of these subjects gave rise to vexatious and painful controversies, and to much bitterness of spirit, which found expression in the intemperate and uncharitable judgments which those, who thus differed among themselves, pronounced upon one another. An appeal of a public or private kind had been probably made to the apostle Paul, and he here acts the part of a peace-maker, he here seeks to reconcile—to bring together—those who so seriously differed. He does this not by laying down a number of minute rules for the guidance of Christian life in the particular instances referred to; he adopts a much simpler and more effectual method, he reminds them of certain great general principles, which fully recognised, and faithfully carried out, would prove sufficient for the regulation of all Christian life.

He insists on the great principle that in all matters of religious observance, every man is a law to himself. "To his own master he standeth or falleth." By the light which he possesses he must walk, be it more or less.

The Apostle's own example is very instructive. When we look to him we see an enlightened and broad-minded Christian man of independent spirit,—one who could maintain his own ground,

though he stood alone, and enjoy in full measure that liberty wherewith Christ had made him free. The requirements of the Jewish ritual pressed upon him with no force of obligation. He could eat meat which had been offered to an idol—he could eat it even in the temple of idolatry, for in his esteem the idol itself was nothing. He could do this and many other things which his weaker brethren could not do,—for he was fully persuaded in his own mind that the kingdom of God consisted not in meat or in drink—in any outward or ritualistic observance, but in righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost.

But while the Apostle himself occupied this high vantage ground, in respect of ceremonialism, he was very careful and tender in dealing with the scruples of those who differed from him; careful lest in the exercise of his liberty he should offend them,—cause them to stumble. Very candidly, very simply does he deal with those complicated cases of conscience which were so continually arising out of the peculiar circumstances of the Church of that period. "Let every man," this is his advice; "let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind—let him act up to the light he has, be it great or small, always turning towards the light, seeking to get as much light as possible; at the same time let him maintain and manifest a spirit of charity in reference to those

who may differ from him, believing that he that regardeth the day regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it. He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks. . . . Let us not, therefore, judge one another any more, but judge this rather, that no man put a stumbling block or an occasion to fall in his brother's way."

This, then, is the position of the Apostle: "Be fully persuaded in your own mind; be not moved about by every shifting wind of opinion; have your own opinion and hold it, but do not always stand on your rights; be not careful to assert to the full even your Christian liberty; know when and where to yield; know when and where to be firm and uncompliant. 'We, then, that are strong (let this be the rule in all such matters) ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let every one of us please his neighbour for his good to edification; for even Christ pleased not Himself.'"

Such, briefly stated, seems to be the rule which the Apostle laid down for the guidance of these Christians in Rome, and we cannot but feel that he here gives utterance to an unchanging law of Christian life, to which we are called

—in this later age, and these very different circumstances—to profess subjection.

Let us, then, look at this general question of *pleasing ourselves*, inquiring—

I. IN WHAT RESPECTS WE OUGHT NOT TO SEEK TO PLEASE OURSELVES?

II. IN WHAT RESPECTS, AND TO WHAT EXTENT, WE MAY SEEK TO PLEASE OURSELVES.

I. *Our first inquiry is,* IN WHAT RESPECTS OUGHT WE NOT TO SEEK TO PLEASE OURSELVES? With whatever limitations we may understand the prohibition—and there are some necessary limitations to be observed—we cannot but gather from the teaching of the Apostle, and, indeed, from the general tenor of Scripture, that in certain respects we ought not to seek, we ought not even to desire to please ourselves.

The principle which is here laid down differs very widely from that which is ordinarily recognised among men. We have a complete inversion of the commonly prevailing opinion. There are many who are always, and avowedly, seeking to please themselves. It is a fact of which they make no secret, over which they seek to throw no disguise; they have no loftier aim, no worthier ambition. They seem to think that the great end of existence is answered if they can but do as they like—do as they please. All the circumstances of life are ordered, all the relations of life determined with a view to one

end, that they may please themselves. In their selfish endeavour to secure this result, they never pause to consider the feelings or scruples, the interests or rights of others; they never pause to inquire what, in all this, may be the pleasure of God. It is enough if they can but please themselves.

There are others who seek the same end, but in a more indirect and circuitous way. They are men-pleasers. They seem sedulously to court the approval, and carefully to consult the feelings and wishes of others in whatever they do. But in all this professed regard for others we can distinguish a selfish purpose; such mean, though they do not distinctly avow their intention, sooner or later to please themselves.

Without descending to the consideration of minute details, let us note a few particular cases in which we should not seek to please ourselves.

We ought not to seek; we ought not even to desire to please ourselves in any instance in which self-gratification would be inconsistent with the will—the Word—the honour of God. With a presumptuous disregard of Divine authority, Satan and the rebel angels sought to please themselves, and the result was their ignominious ejection from the courts of heaven. Our first parents sought to please themselves, setting at nought the express prohibition of their Maker; and we know how they not only ruined

themselves but entailed upon their descendants a sad inheritance of woe. From that time to this, men have been seeking to please themselves, and in doing so have despised the rule and defied the authority of heaven. The drunkard seeks to please himself by means of brutal excess; the voluptuary by criminal indulgence; the ambitious man by climbing some dizzy height of popular distinction; the covetous man by accumulating around himself heaps of perishable treasure; the worldling by surrounding himself with the gaieties and excitements of so-called "life." With no reference to God,—perhaps with an openly expressed defiance of Him,—such are seeking to please themselves in a way they ought not,—the result being disappointment here, and not, unfrequently, it is to be feared, perdition hereafter.

We ought not to seek to please ourselves, when the self-gratification towards which we reach is inconsistent with the claims of our higher—our spiritual nature. We will not now speak of those grosser forms of self-indulgence, which are manifestly inconsistent with the very idea of a moral and religious life, and which are exposed to the opprobrium of men, as well as the condemnation of God. Besides these there are certain reputable modes of life, against the ordinary, if not the inevitable influences of which we should be sedulously on our guard.

Take, as an example, the common ambition of becoming rich. How many are there the great object of whose life is to accumulate wealth! They do nothing which exposes them to the censure of their fellow men,—indeed their love of money is accounted a virtue rather than a vice. There is no more reputable occupation in this world than money-getting. Every one speaks well of a man if he only prosper in this respect. Yet how many are there who, in their eagerness to appropriate the wealth of this world wrong their own souls! We know that the possession of great wealth may consist with the manifestation of a high-toned piety. We have had some conspicuous examples of this; but they have been few and far between. God's people, as a rule, have not been distinguished by the possession of worldly wealth. They have been the poor of this world, rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom. From more than one declaration of our Saviour we gather that the rich experience special difficulties in maintaining a religious life; and we are told by the Apostle that "they who will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition." A man who proposes to please himself in this direction, who makes up his mind to get rich, may succeed in acquiring wealth; but his very success will, not improb-

ably, be associated with disappointment and loss—he may pierce himself through with many sorrows.

They do not well who, in thinking to please themselves, look not beyond or above mere self-gratification. Their lives may be outwardly of the most decent and reputable kind. There is nothing to violate the ordinary sense of propriety. The one great blot upon such lives—which mars and disfigures everything else—is that of selfishness. The one aim with such is to secure as large an amount as possible of personal ease, comfort, enjoyment, — there is no thought which travels beyond these things. They are "lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God;" "they mind earthly things." It is sad to think how many there are who live having no nobler ambition than to please themselves,—who can look over a long and materially prosperous career without being able to point to one single thing done with the distinct intention of serving men or glorifying God. No one ought thus to seek to please himself.

We are not to please ourselves at the expense of others. We are not to please ourselves where we run the risk of making others suffer loss. The reference here, of course, is a special one, to the relations we sustain to Christian brethren within the Church. We feel that we have a perfect right to do a certain thing; we could do

it without any scruple, without any misgiving, without suffering any loss, and even, it is possible, with some advantage to ourselves; but there are others who not only could not do that thing themselves, but they are so weak that they could not see us do it without becoming unsettled in mind and faith. Well, what under such circumstances is our duty? We are not to please ourselves but to please our weaker brethren for their good and edification.

We have here, however, not only a special reference, but the statement of a general principle which admits of universal application—a principle which reverses the world's judgment, and condemns the world's practice. In the world the rule is, with certain necessary limitations: let every one please himself. When we come to the gospel we meet with a higher rule of life: we are not to please ourselves, but others—our neighbour, our brother—and in doing this we are to seek to please God. This duty we have commended to us by the example of Christ, who pleased not Himself. If anyone had a right to please Himself it was Christ; if anyone were able to please Himself it was Christ. Yet even Christ pleased not Himself. He came not to do His own will, but the will of His Father, who bore this testimony concerning Him: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased." In all that Christ did He considered us. Through-

out the whole of His earthly ministry we never see Him seeking to please Himself. He went about doing good. He lived among men as one that served, and that He might render to us the most effectual of all services—that He might save us from sin and its terrible consequences—He did not shrink from the pain and shame of the Cross. In all this He has left us an example that we should follow in His steps. The great thing for us is to cultivate an unselfish, Christ-like spirit, not pleasing ourselves, but seeking to please others, and so to please God. If, in trying to please others, we keep well before us the example of Christ, we shall learn the important lesson that we are not to seek to please others, where this can only be done by weak or sinful compliance. The rule is a plain one: "Let every one of us please his neighbour for his good to edification." If we remember this rule, we shall not, in our intercourse with our fellow-men, conform our practice to that of some foolish parents, who are so intent on pleasing their children that they spoil them. In seeking to please others, our aim must be to secure their good, and to promote God's glory.

II. *Our next inquiry is this:* IN WHAT RESPECTS, AND TO WHAT EXTENT MAY WE PLEASE OURSELVES? As it is evident that there are certain forms of self-gratification which we should not seek to realise, so it is plain there

are others which we may quite legitimately desire and aim at. When we are taught that we should not please ourselves, it means that we should not do so in neglect or defiance of God's will—that we should not do so where self-gratification involves the subordination and depression of our higher and better nature—that we should not do so where our pleasure is to be obtained at the cost of another's pain or loss. But we are nowhere taught in Scripture that, in an ascetic spirit, we are to deny ourselves all pleasure in life, that we are scrupulously to abstain from whatever can afford us gratification.

> "Religion never was designed
> To make our pleasures less."

Religion teaches us that the truest self-gratification is that which comes to us, not as the result of self-seeking, but as associated with a self-denying attempt to please and serve others, and so to please and serve God.

The cry of the world is, Whom should we seek to please if not ourselves? The utterance of Divine wisdom is, Seek to please others—seek to please God, and then you will please yourselves without seeking. Without self-denial no man can attain to self-gratification, and it may be boldly and broadly affirmed that no one ever yet pleased himself, who did not please God first.

One of the lying sophistries of Satan is, that religion lays its ban on pleasure, whereas it only calls us off from the false, delusive, disappointing pleasures of sin and worldliness, and urges us to seek after true blessedness, and to seek after it in the right way.

We see men blindly groping about the world for what they cannot find; we hear them uttering the old, plaintive, almost despairing cry, "Who will show us any good?" We need not inquire who they are that thus speak, what their position in the world, their past experience, their future prospects. They may be rich and noble, having all the material of enjoyment at their disposal; wealth, and all that wealth can purchase; power, and all the obsequious attendance that power can command; or they may be at the other extremity of the social scale. But, however they differ in these or other respects, they agree in this: they are dissatisfied; they have not what they want; they have not succeeded in pleasing themselves; they, with all their getting, have not what may be rightly spoken of as *good*. How true, yet how sad a picture do the few words of the Psalmist call up: "There be many that say, Who will show us any good?" These who are seeking to please themselves are described not as inquiring for some special form of good, of which they happen to be destitute—its highest, its supreme mani-

festation, which is to crown and irradiate that unto which they have already attained,—but the earnest, passionate, almost despairing cry is, Who will show us *any* good? Long have they wandered in life's desert, seeking rest and satisfaction, and finding none; they have seen fruit hanging in richest clusters, but it has proved disappointing as the apples of Sodom; streams bright and clear have crossed their path, but they have had the bitterness of Marah's water; visions of rich pasture and shade-giving trees have, from time to time, stretched onwards before them, but they have been only visions; and now there is nothing left for them but to utter, in misery and hopelessness, the same sad cry with which they commenced their quest, Who will show us any good?

Now the Gospel comes to men who are thus vainly attempting to please themselves, and not only tells them that they should not do this, but convinces them that what they aim at is beyond their reach. This conviction is the commencement of a better life. As long as anyone believes that earth will afford what he wants, he will never look to heaven. Man will never cease from his unavailing labour of hewing out for himself broken cisterns till he is convinced that they will hold no water.

We have the whole thing set before us in the parable of the prodigal son. He sought to

please himself. It was this desire to please himself which led him to ask for his portion of goods, and then, not many days after, to go into the far country. He was seeking to please himself all the while he was wasting his goods upon harlots and in riotous living; and thus he went on until he came to his right mind, and saw what a miserable mistake he had been making. Convinced of his mistake, it was not long ere his face was turned towards his father's house. So is it with every sinner. As long as anyone indulges the fancy that he can please himself, so long will he try to do so. Saul of Tarsus tried to please himself with a pharisaic righteousness, and, as he himself reminds us, if anyone had reason to be satisfied, pleased with himself, he had; but after a while God convinced him of his mistake, and from that moment what things were gains to him, those he counted loss for Christ. The very first work of God's grace is to convince the sinner that he cannot, by his own unaided effort, reach that, unto which he is seeking to attain; and that same grace teaches him that the rest, the peace, the pleasure which have been vainly sought elsewhere are to be found in Christ. No one can truly please himself whose conscience is burdened with unforgiven sin; peace of conscience, rest for the weary soul, true satisfying blessedness, these are to be found in Christ alone. If living a life of

faith in Christ Jesus, we seek, with a single eye and a sincere heart, to please God, and our neighbour for his good to edification, we shall realise a blessedness not otherwise attainable, and find that the ways of religion are ways of pleasantness and peace. Let anyone seek to please himself, walking according to the desires and imaginations of his own heart, the result will be certainly disappointment, perhaps death. Let anyone, in God's own way, try to please God, and he will please himself without trying. Let us, then, NOT PLEASE OURSELVES. LET EVERY ONE OF US PLEASE HIS NEIGHBOUR, FOR HIS GOOD TO EDIFICATION. FOR EVEN CHRIST PLEASED NOT HIMSELF.

III.

The Two Sisters.

JOHN xi. 21, 32.

"*Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died.*"

IN the Gospels we are presented with the biography of Christ. We have a portraiture of the Son of the Highest, living among the children of men, not drawn with laborious care, by the hand of an earthly artist, but photographed upon the pages of Scripture by the light of heaven itself. This biographical portraiture differs from all ordinary biographies, almost as much as the life portrayed differs from all ordinary lives. Much is placed on record, which the unassisted mind of man would have utterly overlooked; while much is left out, which would have occupied a prominent and important place in any ordinary memoir.

Christ as the great Teacher, as the divinely appointed Saviour of men, shines forth in bold and luminous relief. Nothing which pertains to our salvation—which has any direct bearing on life or godliness—is mysterious or uncertain.

But of Christ's private life, we have scarcely any record; of the many hours He spent in retirement from the world, we are told almost nothing. We are only favoured with a very partial and occasional glimpse of that with which we all desire more familiar acquaintance. Enough, however, have we to convince us, that Christ, while really the Son of God, is not less really the Son of man, the subject of those affections and sympathies which are common to humanity, and which led Him, when on earth, to honour with a special regard the beloved disciple, and to rejoice in the shelter of the quiet home of Bethany.

This family occupies a more prominent position in New Testament history than any other, and gathers unto itself a large measure of warm personal interest even to this day. It consisted of two sisters and one brother, who seem according to the simple fashion of those early times, to have been living together in easy circumstances in a house of their own in Bethany. To this family at Bethany—a little village on the eastern slope of the mount of Olives, about a mile-and-a-half from Jerusalem—our Saviour often went, and there He met not only with kindly hospitality, but in some large degree with appreciation and sympathy.

It is pleasant to think of our Divine Redeemer, who so often had not where to lay His head,

visiting from time to time this village home. The labours of the day having been brought to a close, we can conceive of Him wending His way from Jerusalem wearied by the noise and bustle of the city, often by the contradiction of sinners against Himself, anticipating in the home of him He loved the quiet refreshment He so much needed, and which there He always found.

How hard is it for us to realise the fact! how strange to think! that the world knew Him not. Now that the fame of Jesus everywhere prevails, we can scarcely believe that He should, at least in His earlier visits to Bethany, have passed through that village street unnoticed and unknown; or if He engaged the attention of any, as He exchanged a greeting with those who loitered by the way-side, or paused to smile upon and inwardly to bless the little children in their play, that He should have been known only as the occasional guest of Lazarus and his sisters, and in no wise as the incarnate Son of God and Saviour of the world.

Nor is it easy for us to imagine the joy which His presence would awaken in the hearts of the two sisters—a joy which was by them so differently expressed. The one with busy haste setting herself to provide for his material entertainment; the other sitting in eastern manner, at the feet of Jesus, looking up with eyes full of love and

reverence to her Master, and listening eagerly to those words of Divine wisdom which, as falling from His lips, were in her esteem sweeter than honey or the dropping of the honeycomb.

This chapter is chiefly taken up with an account of the most memorable and wonderful of all the miracles wrought by Christ; and one invested with peculiar interest as having been wrought within the circle of that family with which He seems to have been so intimately associated.

We may learn from this narrative a lesson which we have all great need to lay to heart—that the love of Christ does not exempt those who enjoy it from the endurance of earthly sorrow and suffering. The shadow of sickness descends upon this highly favoured household, and then the darker shadow of death. First, we see the sisters watching anxiously by the sick-bed of their only brother Lazarus, then in their great fear determining to send a messenger for Jesus; then do we see them counting the hours and moments of that time which they know must elapse ere their friend Jesus can arrive, and then painfully wondering at His non-arrival; and finally we see them in the stillness of a house where death reigns, and with a strange sense of desolation in their hearts—for their brother is dead and Jesus comes not.

In the greatness of their distress, the sisters

seem to have instinctively turned in thought to their truest and best friend. Jesus was at this time residing at some considerable distance from Bethany, and the sisters probably did not feel at liberty to send for Him till the illness of their brother assumed a serious and alarming form; indeed, he must have been near death at the time of the messenger's departure. We are surprised, at first, by the delay which occurs after Christ's reception of the message. But He tells the disciples that that very delay was to subserve the glory of God and their good. Christ in all such matters occupied a purely exceptional position. We, if we would do some deed of mercy, have need to hasten, lest the opportunity be lost for ever. The earthly physician may not tarry, lest death carry off the patient ere he arrives. But Christ, the great Physician, is not hindered by such narrow limitations. He can never arrive too late; for He has power not only to check the ravages of disease, but to rescue from the embrace of death. He who can say to the sick, the enfeebled, the impotent, "Arise, take up thy bed and walk," can stand at the mouth of the sepulchre and say, "Lazarus, come forth."

But while Jesus thus mysteriously tarries, there is the arrival, according to Jewish custom, of many acquaintances and friends, who come to mourn over the dead, and condole with the bereaved; but they have no power to dry the

weeping eyes, or pour the balm of a satisfying consolation into the broken heart. On the fourth day Jesus arrives, bringing with Him that comfort which the bereaved sisters so greatly needed; and, which was best of all, He by the exercise of His divine power raises their brother Lazarus from the dead.

We can scarcely, in however cursory a way, glance at this wonderful narrative, without being impressed by the fact, rendered therein so evident —*that these two sisters, strangely unlike in many respects, agree very remarkably in these:*

I. IN THEIR EXPERIENCE OF A COMMON GRIEF.

II. IN THEIR SUBJECTION TO A COMMON INFIRMITY.

III. IN THEIR ENJOYMENT OF A COMMON CONSOLATION.

I. WE SEE THEM AGREE IN THEIR EXPERIENCE OF A COMMON GRIEF. The same calamity has descended with crushing, desolating force upon both sisters. They have experienced a common loss. They have had snatched from them a common object of affection, and they have, probably, during the last few days been brought closer together than in any previous portion of their lives. They were very different these two sisters; different in character and temperament—in their habits of thought and life, so different as to render it difficult, well-nigh impossible, for the

one to understand, and justly appreciate the other. The one eminently practical, the other quiet and contemplative. To the eyes of Mary the life of Martha would appear a needless whirl of excitement and activity; by Martha the life of Mary would be regarded as a somewhat unprofitable dream. There can be no doubt that they often unwittingly vexed one another. A household so composed can never prove perfectly harmonious. Mary would be often worried by the ceaseless activity and restlessness of Martha. Martha would be irritated by the repose and inactivity of Mary, from which she was scarcely to be aroused by the pressure of household cares. Their differences are evident enough even in this time of sorrow. We see Martha still burdened with, and able to bear, the cares of the household, while Mary sits apart nursing her great grief.

Yet with all these differences they are now brought together as they have never been before. Martha does not now complain of her sister's sorrowful inactivity; she does not now, as she did once, rush into the Master's presence with the petulant cry, "Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? Bid her, therefore, that she help me," though, in all likelihood, she was never more heavily burdened with household cares than now, and never more completely left to bear them alone. But now in

this great grief, in which the lesser cares and worries of life are forgotten, these two sisters are drawn together in mutual sympathy, and each comes to Jesus oppressed with the same sorrow, and uttering the same pathetic words, "Lord, if Thou hadst been here my brother had not died." Yes, during these last few days the sisters have forgotten their differences. They have been watching together by the sick-bed of their brother; they both agreed in sending for the Master, in waiting for Him, in wondering why He came not, why He should thus seem to neglect them, and suffer the friend whom He loved, and the brother whom they loved, to die. The events of the last few days have, while involving them in the gloom of a common grief, served to knit together their hearts in an unwonted degree.

Do we not often see something of the same kind in ordinary life? Are not such differences as these frequently distinguishable in the same household? Do we not, owing to these differences, find it at times very difficult to understand, to appreciate, and to bear with one another? Have not many of the petty vexations of life, their root in those differences of constitution and temperament which distinguish members of the same household; differences which create an unpleasant or even positively painful sense of incongruity? And how often

do we find, when some great calamity descends upon such a household, that at once every discord is hushed, all irritability is allayed, and heart is bound to heart by the ties of a common sympathy. At such times, for a season at least, the differences which distinguish are forgotten, and all are seen yielding to the impulse of a common affection — bowing under the chastening influence of a common grief; and this power of drawing together those who are ordinarily divided seems one of the most blessed of the many "sweet uses of adversity."

II. WE SEE THESE SISTERS AGREE IN THEIR SUBJECTION TO A COMMON INFIRMITY. No one can read this narrative without being struck by the circumstance that both these sisters meet Jesus with precisely the same exclamation,— "Lord, if Thou hadst been here, my brother had not died." We have proof that the same thought was uppermost in the mind of each sister, in the fact that in each case it leaped forth irrepressibly, clothed in exactly the same form of words. This coincidence is all the more remarkable when we take into account the differences which so broadly distinguished these sisters. Though members of the same family; though strongly attached to each other, they were so different in character, temperament, modes of thought and life, that we should scarcely expect to find Martha and Mary view-

ing anything in precisely the same light, thinking or speaking about anything in precisely the same way. And yet, on this occasion, we find each, on first meeting with Jesus, addressing Him with the same exclamation,—"Lord, if Thou hadst been here, my brother had not died."

These words, expressing the same predominating idea, proceeding from both alike, reveal the fact that these sisters, with all their differences, *are subject to the same infirmity.* They have, both, strangely confused and imperfect conceptions of the Lord's character and position. They both welcome Him with joy as their true comforter; they both look up to Him with reverence as invested with great and miraculous powers; but they also both seem to share the same idea, that these powers can only be put forth under certain conditions and limitations. The thought which is uppermost in their minds, and which thus finds instant expression, is that all might have been different, that all would have been different, if only Christ had been *there*, near at hand, and not afar off. If He had been only staying in the house, or tarrying at Jerusalem; if they had only sent for Him sooner; if, being sent for, He had only come earlier,—then their brother would not have died; then all would have been different, and, in their judgment, better. We cannot fail to see in all this faith, in Christ, and yet how does

unbelief hinder and limit the operation of faith, and render the very expression of faith inconsistent with itself! A little more thought, a little more consideration, a little more faith, and they would have been relieved from their perplexity. They would not, in their thoughts, have limited the Holy One of Israel. Had He not healed the centurion's servant without going to the house? Though there was much in their Lord's method of procedure which they could not explain, they might have known that He had in view some wise and gracious purpose; and that, though He was away, if He had so willed it, their brother would not have died.

Is not this infirmity of faith, in subjection to which these two sisters agreed, precisely that from which we all suffer, more or less? Have not we often felt just in this way, though the feeling has never expressed itself at all, or has gone forth under some form of words different from this? We suffer from some worldly loss; we meet with some accident; some dear friend or relative is removed from us by death; and what, ordinarily, is the very first thing we do? Why, we fix upon the immediate, the proximate, the material causes, and we say,—if this or that thing had been different, then all would have been different—and, perhaps, better. If we had not become acquainted with such a person,

we should not have suffered from such a loss; if we had not taken a certain journey, or engaged in a certain employment, we should not have met with that accident: if we had employed different means, or the same means earlier and more diligently, we might have been spared that bereavement, the gloom of which overshadows our life. Do we not, when we thus think and speak, declare how imperfect is our view of, how infirm is our faith in that minute, watchful, all-embracing Providence, which, in every particular, expresses the will of Him who is "too wise to err, too good to be unkind;" of Him who numbers the very hairs of our head, and marks the single sparrow as it falls fluttering to the ground.

Unless human nature were then something very different from what it is now, we may fairly take these words as expressing more than a merely imperfect apprehension of the character and power of Christ. In each case we can distinguish an undertone of pathetic reproach or remonstrance. "Lord, if Thou hadst been here, my brother had not died." And, though they dare not put the question in so many words; though they would have utterly shrunk from the idea of calling into question the Lord's wisdom or love; yet, far away down in their hearts—they scarcely suspecting its existence—was there the feeling which might have thus

expressed itself:—"Lord, why; oh, why wast Thou not here? Lord, why didst Thou not come? Did we not send to Thee? Why didst Thou tarry? We were so sure Thou wouldst come, even to the very last. We waited hour by hour, moment by moment. We gave not sleep to our eyes, nor slumber to our eyelids. We waited for Thy coming as those wait that watch for the morning, wondering that the night lasted so long, yet sure that it would not last always. We watched the ebbing life of our brother, sorrowful, yet not in despair, thinking how he would all at once revive at the very sight of Thee; but Thou didst not come. 'Lord, if Thou hadst been here, our brother had not died.'"

How common such a state of mind is, everyone knows, who knows anything of grief, who knows anything of his own heart. We can, without any great effort, place ourselves where those two sisters were, and understand, in some degree, what they felt. *We* are painfully, and, in our judgment, for the time, prejudicially affected by some dispensation of Providence. We utter no complaint; we urge no charge; we flatter ourselves that we are ready to recognise the wisdom and the love of God in all things. But, do we not all the while wish that things were different, and almost repine because they are not? The great lesson of

acquiescence in, of willing, cheerful submission to the will of God, however that will may express itself, is a lesson not learned so soon or so easily as many imagine. We are all ready to say, "Lord, if Thou hadst been here, my brother had not died;" and, whether it were so or not in the case of Martha and Mary—mingling with much beside—there is, with us, an undertone of unacknowledged, perhaps unsuspected reproach or remonstrance.

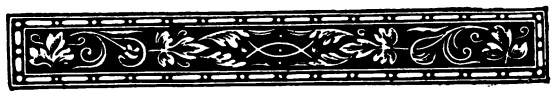
III. WE SEE THESE SISTERS AGREE IN THE ENJOYMENT OF A COMMON CONSOLATION. In times of prosperity they both rejoiced in the friendship of Christ, and acknowledged Him as Lord and Master. In the heart of each there was a very deep and sincere feeling of love and reverence, expressed by Martha, in the active service she rendered in ministering to the material wants of Christ; by Mary, in the eager and devout attention she paid to His words. And now, in this their time of sorrow, they both find their thoughts going forth in one direction, and meeting in one person—the person of their Lord. They both agree in sending for Him; they both feel that if any effectual help come to them, it must come from Him; and though they have been disappointed, and have been painfully wondering why He came not, why He suffered their brother to die, yet now that He has arrived, their burden seems

easier to bear; there is already some return of light to their dwelling, and they feel, though they know not yet in what form it may come, that their Master has even now a blessing in store for them. We see Him unfold to them His own Divine character as the Resurrection and the Life, and then He goes with them to the grave of their brother, not merely that He might there mingle His tears with theirs, but that He might declare in act, what He has previously declared in word, that He is the Resurrection and the Life. He stands at the mouth of the sepulchre, and cries with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth!" and to the surprise of all, and the inexpressible joy of some, he comes forth, obedient to the all-compelling voice. Then would the disciples know that all this happened "for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby."

And is it not a very pleasant and comfortable thought that we, in these later and much changed times—that we, with all our differences, have within our reach the same great sources of comfort? The words that the Saviour spoke unto these sorrowing women of Judæa, more than eighteen hundred years ago, still come home to the hearts of men and women in England with a strange power of consolation; and we feel that we have almost as great an

interest in the raising of Lazarus as his sisters, who gazed with joyful surprise on the event. And we feel thus, because they are the words and the act of Him who is ever the same; who is now what He was then; who is to us, what He was to them. He is our best and truest friend, and if we will but listen for His voice, we may hear Him say distinctly as ever, "I am the Resurrection and the Life: he that believeth in Me, though he were dead, yet shall he live; and whosoever liveth and believeth in Me, shall never die." This announcement, which broke in like a gleam of consoling light upon the gloom which settled down upon the little household of Bethany, has ever since been shining as a light in a dark place, and has still power to quiet and comfort the hearts of all true believers. What indeed, in any time of sorrow, can we desire more than that Christ should come to us, and make the glad announcement which, as pronounced by Him, carries with it immediate conviction: "I am the Resurrection and the Life!" And let us remember, that while we have not our homes hallowed by the bodily presence of our Saviour, we may have our hearts both satisfied and sanctified by His spiritual indwelling; and we have never need to send a messenger to ask Him to come to our rescue: we need not wait wearily day after day for His much-desired and long-delayed appearance,

wondering first whether He will come, and then more painfully wondering why He does not come. From all this we are saved. He is to us an Almighty and ever-present Friend—always ready to comfort, and near to help.



IV.

The Three Crosses.

JOHN xix. 17, 18.

"*And He bearing His cross went forth into a place called the place of a skull, which is called in the Hebrew Golgotha: where they crucified Him, and two others with Him, on either side one, and Jesus in the midst.*"

IF we exclude from our minds all reference to the spiritual significance of the events which transpired at Calvary; if we take no account of what went before and what followed after; in this chapter, and the corresponding chapters of the other Gospels, we have merely the record of the public execution of three criminals, or of three men who were declared to be criminals, and were as such adjudged by the supreme authority to suffer death, in its most agonising and ignominious form. We have merely this, and nothing more.

But the question arises, *Can* we take this narrow and limited view of the events which then transpired? Do we not feel that many other things must be taken into account to render these very facts, as here related, intelligible?

Can we for one moment imagine, that by those who were then dwelling in Jerusalem, and who were drawn together to behold this great sight, these men, who were so evidently fellow-sufferers, were accounted also fellow-criminals? Most of those who visited Calvary must have felt that one of the three who there suffered—He who hung in the midst, on the central cross—was no ordinary, common-place criminal. If a criminal at all (and about this they must have had their doubts), they must have acknowledged that He was a very distinguished criminal.

Jesus of Nazareth was one of the best-known personages of the day, and, though hated by the chief priests and rulers of the Jews, had been, till quite recently, a decided favourite with the common people. Vague rumours were in circulation as to certain very wonderful things which happened at His birth, which seemed to signify that He was no ordinary mortal. For the last three years He had been attracting very general attention to Himself—He had been going about the cities and villages preaching and teaching; not only uttering very remarkable truths, but speaking with a strange air of authority, which clearly separated Him from the ordinary teachers of the Jews. Men seemed more astonished by His mode of teaching than by what He taught. During these three years He had not only been speaking words of wisdom, He had also been

performing many miracles—chiefly miracles of healing. He had opened blind eyes, unstopped deaf ears, healed all manner of sicknesses and diseases among the people, and had even, in several well-known instances, restored to life those who were dead. All these things, and many besides, had served to render Jesus of Nazareth an object of very general interest in Judæa. His recent arrest in the garden, and His hurried and informal trial, had created a a great sensation in Jerusalem; and His death by crucifixion, a still greater sensation; for, not only was His behaviour on the cross very singular—so much so as unmistakeably to separate Him from the other malefactors, and occasion very general remark among the spectators; but, however it is to be accounted for, His death certainly was associated with some very remarkable signs. There was a strange and quite preternatural darkness, which lasted three hours; and, at the very moment of his death, the vail of the Temple was rent in twain; and there was an earthquake, and the rocks were rent, and some who were in their graves came forth. So wonderful was all this, that when the centurion saw what was done, he glorified God, saying, "Certainly this was a righteous man; and all the people who came together to that sight, beholding the things that were done, smote their breasts and returned." The general impres-

sion produced at the time seems to have been that, whether Jesus of Nazareth was or was not all that He claimed to be—all that His disciples declared Him to be—such strange things happened when He died as to show, especially when viewed in connection with the facts of His previous history, that He was no ordinary person, His death no ordinary event.

What has occurred since is equally calculated to awaken astonishment. The disciples of Jesus, who seemed so overwhelmed with dismay at the time of His death, were to be seen a short time afterwards in the very streets of Jerusalem, declaring publicly and positively, that He who had been so recently crucified outside the gate of the city, and buried in the sepulchre of Joseph of Arimathæa, had risen from the dead, and was now exalted as a Prince and a Saviour; and was, as such, sitting at God's right hand, invested with all power both in heaven and on earth. In proof of these strange words which the disciples spake, they were enabled to work many unquestionable miracles in the sight of the people; all of which were wrought, as they tell us, in the name and by the power of their risen Lord.

From that time to this, He who was lifted up upon that central cross has been drawing men unto Himself; and by a constantly increasing multitude has been regarded as both Lord and Christ, the Son of God and the Saviour of men.

At this very moment there are millions of the wisest and best of the children of men who are resting all their hopes for time and eternity on the Sacrifice which was, as they believe, then offered—the Atonement which was then made.

If, then, this view of the case be the correct one (and nothing else suffices to explain what has happened), that crucifixion on Calvary was indeed no ordinary transaction, but, beyond all dispute, the most important event which ever transpired in this world—an event which must ever occupy a place by itself. There is nothing which angels look upon with so much wonder, which men should look upon with so much gratitude, as this central fact in the great mystery of redemption. Every detail of the narrative is invested with interest and significance, and claims from us the exercise of devout and reverent attention.

There are some thoughts worthy of notice suggested by the circumstance celebrated in our text—that our Divine Redeemer was not only condemned to be crucified, but that they crucified "*two other with Him, on either side one, and Jesus in the midst.*"

Let us, then, in thought, join ourselves to the multitude which is flowing forth tumultuously from the city, eager to witness an event in which they have all the deepest concern, but the true

significance of which they do not even dimly perceive.

We pass through the gate of the city, and we come to the place of public execution—a place called Golgotha; and there we see three crosses, and extended on them in cruel agony three men, who, as condemned malefactors, were enduring that most painful and ignominious punishment which was reserved for slaves, and the very dregs and off-scourings of the criminal population. Nailed to the top of the central cross is there an inscription very legibly written in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, so that all might read, JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS.

Let us sit down and watch Him there; and as we cannot even now, gaze without emotion on the scene presented to us, we may—perhaps, with some advantage to ourselves—inquire as to the meaning and mystery of this great sight, which, after the lapse of ages and generations, is still so potent to stir some of the deepest feelings of the human heart.

I. Looking at these three crosses, we learn THAT WITH GREAT SIMILARITY IN THE OUTWARD AND MATERIAL CIRCUMSTANCES OF MEN, WHETHER IN LIFE OR DEATH, THERE MAY BE THE GREATEST DIFFERENCE IN CHARACTER AND DESTINY. If we had stood on Calvary, in the neighbourhood of those three

crosses, strangers to all the circumstances which had previously transpired, and knowing nothing of the private life, the personal history, of these three men, what would have been the conclusion at which we should have arrived? We should have supposed, and not unnaturally, that they had been associated in a career of crime, even as now involved in the same righteous condemnation, they are associated in suffering and death. But how great would have been our mistake! How far removed would our conclusion have been from the truth! Two of these men are criminals justly condemned—malefactors belonging, it is not unlikely, to the band of which Barabbas was the leader. But He who suffers on the central cross is Jesus of Nazareth, against whom no word of just reproach can be spoken, whom His bitterest enemies cannot convince of sin, and who has been ever going about doing good. There are many doubtless in that crowd of onlookers who have abundant reason to speak well of Him, and are thinking it a strange thing that One who had only brought life and healing to them should be hanging there in ignominy and pain. He suffers there between two thieves; but He differs immeasurably from His fellow-sufferers, for He suffers for sins not His own—He suffers as the Divine Redeemer, "the just for the unjust."

We cannot remain near these three crosses

long, without becoming cognizant of the fact that there is a great moral and spiritual difference between those who are hanging by the side of the Redeemer. Both are criminals, justly suffering the consequences of their crimes; but we see the one, penitent—believing—saved; the other hopelessly, blasphemously impenitent to the last. The one rises from the shame and agony of the cross to the glory and blessedness of paradise. The other sinks from shame and suffering which may be measured, to the immeasurable shame and woe of perdition. Alike in outward circumstances, how different in character and destiny are these men!

II. Looking at these three crosses, we feel that we are presented with AN UNPARALLELED EXHIBITION OF HUMAN WICKEDNESS. Here do we see the sin of the world culminate in an act of such fearful atrocity, that it does not, at least in its outward form, admit of repetition. It is a crime which, in its hideousness and enormity, must ever stand alone. Men were suffered to go to such unexampled lengths of wickedness, that on the very occasion on which atonement for sin was made, there was such a discovery of the enormity and shamefulness of sin as had never been witnessed before, as shall never be witnessed again. God here exhibits, side by side, the disease and the remedy; the poison and the antidote; the curse of sin and

the cure for it. The hands of men had often been imbrued with innocent blood before. Many righteous god-fearing men had, ere this, perished in Jerusalem. Upon the consciences of the men of this very generation was there the blood of a long list of martyrs, from that of the proto-martyr Abel, to that of Zacharias, son of Barachias, who perished between the temple and the altar. But now a more stupendous crime is perpetrated. Now sin attains a more appalling height, and, throwing off all disguise, reveals the real hideousness of its character. That enmity, which had so often declared itself in the slaying of God's servants, now declares itself in the slaying of God's Son. Who can speak—who can think—slightly of sin, remembering that it led men on from one degree of wickedness to another, till at last, with wicked hands, they crucified the Son of God Himself, and put Him to an open shame? And we see them, not content with inflicting death upon Him in so cruel and ignominious a form, but seeking an additional gratification of their unnatural, their diabolic hate, *in crucifying Him between two thieves.*

The crucifixion of Christ stands out as the blackest deed in the long and fearful catalogue of human crimes, as the point beyond which it seems impossible for man to go. We can scarcely bring ourselves to believe that the same principle of evil, with the manifold expressions of

which we are so familiar, could declare itself in so terrible and deadly a form. Here have we the warrant of fact for the statement of the Apostle—"The carnal mind is enmity against God." For the enactment of this tragedy there seemed necessary the concurrence and combination of nearly all the evils which have their seat and hold their sway in the now ruined temple of man's heart. Here do we see, linked together in a hideous confederacy, cowardice, cruelty, ambition, avarice, pride, and envy, and prejudice; compassing with fiendish ingenuity the death, and exulting with fiendish malignity in the agonies of the Son of God and the Saviour of men.

How fearfully demoralising and deadening an influence must sin exert upon its victims, that men should be able to prefer Barabbas to Christ, and then take Christ Himself, the Holy and the Just, and crucify Him between two thieves!

Let us not imagine, however, that sin has expended all its venom in inflicting that deadly stroke, and that now it only exists in a modified and amended form. Sin is ever the same; it is as deadly in its nature and operation now as then. Though often assuming a very subtle and plausible disguise, there are still existing in the unrenewed heart of man those same evil passions and principles which, eighteen hundred years ago, declared themselves so unmistakably in crucifying Christ between two thieves.

III. Looking upon these three crosses, we see HOW GOD MAKES USE OF THE EVIL PASSIONS, AND THE THOUGHTLESS OR MALIGNANT CONDUCT OF MEN, FOR THE ACCOMPLISHMENT OF HIS OWN GRACIOUS AND BENEFICENT PURPOSES. We see this in the entire history of the crucifixion. We see this in the particular circumstance now under consideration.

The crucifixion of Christ we regard as the great central fact in that plan of salvation which expresses in the highest degree God's wisdom and power. All this was arranged and settled in eternity; all had been predicted or prefigured under the Old Testament dispensation, and so exactly, that the prophetical delineation of those stupendous events which transpired in the fulness of time included the most minute and, considered in themselves, the most unimportant circumstances. All was wrought according to the predeterminate counsel and foreknowledge of God; and yet all was accomplished in such a way that the liberty and responsibility of the agents in this great transaction were not in the slightest degree trenched upon. If we gaze upon the scene as it is presented to us, we see everyone pursuing his own purpose, gratifying his own passions, yielding to the unchecked impulse of his own heart, doing what seemed good in his own eyes; yet are we taught that all these men were contributing unconsciously to the accom-

plishment of God's purpose, the exact and literal fulfilment of His Word.

If we confined our attention to what we found lying immediately on the surface, we should say that the crucifixion of Christ was the result of the mortified pride and malignant envy of the Scribes and Pharisees and rulers of the Jews, working by means of the worldly views and disappointed hopes of the populace, the covetousness and ambition of Judas, the criminal indecision and weakness of Pilate, and the blind mechanical obedience of the Roman soldiery. But, high above all this tumult of the people, do we see the Lord sitting in the heavens, holding their impotent rage in derision, and accomplishing by their means His own unchangeable purpose.

We are especially impressed by the way in which the purpose of God was carried out to the very letter, in what we are tempted to speak of as the minor transactions of Calvary. We see, for instance, some Roman soldiers casting lots at the foot of the cross for the clothes of the Crucified One; we see them offer Him who hangs upon that cross vinegar and hyssop; and, when they seek to hasten the death of those crucified with Christ, by breaking their legs, we are told that they brake not His legs, because He was dead already; but one of the soldiers, to make quite sure of His death, thrust his spear into His side, upon which there flowed forth

blood and water. In all this do we see these rude, rough soldiers of Rome, with no thought of God's will, or God's Word, unconsciously accomplishing both.

We could be furnished with no more striking illustration of this principle than we have here, in the fact of our Saviour's crucifixion between two thieves. The world has never witnessed so hateful an expression of malignity as that which we see at the cross of Christ. It was evidently the design of the chief priests and rulers of the Jews, not only that Christ should suffer death, but that His death should be associated with circumstances of unexampled degradation. They wished to render His name and memory infamous—so infamous that His deluded followers should not only shrink from calling themselves by His name, but should be ashamed even to hear it mentioned. They would, by any means, "stamp out" the Nazarene heresy, which had already given them so much trouble, and occasioned them so much uneasiness. Everything was, accordingly, contrived with the view of making the most worthy name of Jesus a by-word and a reproach. The death of the cross, as the most ignominious that could be inflicted, might have satisfied them; but this was not enough: they obtained two notorious criminals, who were crucified with Him, on either side one, and Jesus in the midst, in the hope that He

might be singled out as the worst of the three. With such miserable ingenuity did they seek, by all means, to accomplish their purpose of degrading and rendering infamous the character and name of Jesus. But the Lord in heaven frustrated their evil intention; and they, seeking to render the name of Jesus infamous, did in reality declare Him to be that Messiah, that very Christ of God, concerning whom their own prophet, Isaiah, had predicted that He would be *numbered with the transgressors.* When, then, we see Jesus hanging between two thieves, we see, on the part of those who placed Him there, an unintentional fulfilment of prophecy; and the very circumstance which was designed to brand Him with perpetual infamy converted into a seal and signature of His Messiahship.

IV. Looking upon these three crosses, WE SEE CHRIST IN DEATH, AS IN LIFE, ACTING AS A TEST—A TOUCHSTONE OF CHARACTER. He was set for the rising and fall of many in Israel, and that the thoughts of many hearts should be disclosed. Do we not ever see—have we not ever seen, men falling into two great classes as they are brought into contact with Jesus Christ? We see this at the outset of His career. How differently were men affected by the announcement of His birth! There were some who received it as glad tidings of great joy; there were others who heard it with fear

and dread, as though His visit to our world were an event of evil omen. There were some who diligently sought for the young child, that they might welcome Him with rich gifts and willing homage; there were others who sought for the young child not less diligently, but only that they might slay Him. It was just so throughout the entire public ministry of Christ. From the time of His manifestation unto Israel, we cannot help noticing how differently men were affected by Him. Some loved Him with a deep and earnest love, and reverenced Him with a devout veneration; others seemed only provoked to the display of the most unscrupulous hatred and malignity. Some said, He is a good man; others, Nay, but He deceiveth the people. Some felt with Nicodemus, that no man could work the works which He wrought unless God were with him; others did not scruple to declare that He cast out devils through Beelzebub, the prince of the devils. To some He was a rock to build upon; to others He was a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence. We see precisely the same thing on the cross. Here are two men who have been associated in the perpetration of the same crimes, and who are now associated in the endurance of the same penalty. There is but little in their outward circumstances by which we may distinguish them, the one from the other. In the sinfulness of their lives, they

have both been equally far from God; and now, in the agony of death, they are both equally near the Saviour. But how differently are they affected by Him—how differently are they related to Him! The one is drawn to Christ in believing penitence; the other falls away from Him in blasphemous impiety and unbelief.

As it was, when Christ was lifted up on the cross, so is it wherever Christ is lifted up in the preaching of the Gospel. It was so in apostolic times: all did not believe. To some the Gospel was the savour of life unto life, to others it was the savour of death unto death. Some believed and were saved; others adjudged themselves unworthy of eternal life. It is so to-day. How differently are men related to the Lord Jesus Christ! Some are rejoicing in Christ as their Saviour, while others are treating Him, if not with mocking and blasphemous derision, yet with indifference and neglect.

V. Looking upon these three crosses, WE SEE IN THE CASE OF THE PENITENT THIEF, FAITH EXERCISED AND PARDON GRANTED IN THE VERY LAST EXTREMITY. IN THE CASE OF THE IMPENITENT THIEF, WE SEE AN UNPARDONED SOUL SINK INTO PERDITION FROM THE VERY PRESENCE OF THE SAVIOUR.

Every conversion is a fact so remarkable, that angels may well wonder at it, and, as we know

they do, rejoice over it. But this conversion of the thief on the cross, when apparently trembling on the very verge of ruin, seems more than ordinarily impressive. It may be questioned if there ever has been a more wonderful manifestation of faith than that displayed by this poor man. He looked upon Christ at the moment of His deepest humiliation, when He was forsaken by His friends and reviled by His enemies; and when there seemed, outwardly, so little to warrant it, he addressed a prayer to Him as the Son of God and the Saviour of men. How beautifully simple is the prayer which this dying malefactor addressed to the crucified One, as his Sovereign and Saviour: "Lord, remember me when Thou comest in Thy kingdom." He feels that it is enough to be remembered by Christ, and so all the desire of his heart is poured forth in this single petition, "Lord, remember me!"

Here do we see the triumphant power of Divine grace changing this hardened malefactor, in the very hour and article of death, into a penitent believer. Here do we see Christ's willingness to extend pardon to the most guilty, and His ability to save even to the uttermost. We see Christ hanging upon the Cross, exposed to all the indignities and revilings which were cast upon Him by His enemies, and He answers not a word. He seems indifferent to all that is

transpiring around Him; but it is the silence of patience and not of unconsciousness. So soon as the cry of penitence and the prayer of faith fall upon the ear of the dying Saviour, an immediate and gracious response is called forth. He who opens not His mouth under revilings and reproaches, turns upon the crucified thief a look of tender compassion, and utters the ever memorable words, "This day thou shalt be with Me in Paradise." What may be the joys of Paradise we know not—indeed, who shall say? It was enough for this poor man to know that he was to be with Christ. Who can picture the joy awakened by this glad announcement? He must have almost forgotten the agony of crucifixion, in the joy of knowing that he was to be that very day with Christ in Paradise. What Christ said to the penitent thief, under these exceptional circumstances, He says to every dying believer,—To-day thou shalt be with Me in Paradise. There is to be no painful waiting in some antechamber of Heaven. There is to be no weary delay in some outer court of purification. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. Whatever the transference may involve it is an immediate transference, "To die is gain."

How different a spectacle engages our attention when we look upon the other cross! We see there a man equally near to the Saviour yet

dying unsaved. Nearness to the cross is not enough in itself. Had the cross on which our Saviour suffered been miraculously preserved, men would have been nothing profited, though found clinging to it with desperate tenacity, if they had not faith in the crucified one Himself. We may not safely rest in the enjoyment of any outward kind of privilege. One is ready to fancy that he would be willing to die even on a cross, if he might but die so near the Saviour. The fancy is a vain one. We should not be saved by nearness to the Saviour, if we were not found exercising that faith in Him which it is our privilege to exercise here and now. Two men died very near the Divine Redeemer—that nearness was the means of salvation only to one. The one from being a bold blasphemer became a humble and believing suppliant, and was translated from the cross to Paradise. The other died as he lived, and exchanged blasphemous unbelief for hopeless, because too late conviction.

Let us look at both sides of the cross; on the one side we see a cure for despair and a ground for hope in the very last extremity; on the other side we read an impressive warning directed against that presumption which so often issues in death. We may well remember the quaint saying of some old divine, "There is but one instance of a death-bed repentance in Scripture;

one that none need despair; only one that none should presume."

We here see the Lord Jesus dividing these two thieves. On the one side of the cross do we see faith, and penitence, and the joy of a newly discovered salvation; on the other we see impenitence and impiety, and we hear the tongue of the wicked uttering words of blasphemy, till it is palsied by the touch of death. Still is the cross of Christ—still is the crucified Saviour dividing men into two great classes. All who are brought into contact with the Gospel are at this moment so divided. Some are on the right side, some are on the wrong side of the cross. Some saved, others still unsaved. Some believing, others still refusing to believe. Some ranking with the penitent, others, though perhaps, without his blasphemy, with the impenitent thief. Let it be remembered by all, that men, while thus divided by the cross, *are not, in this life, hopelessly divided.* They may pass from one side of the cross to the other. While life continues there is the possibility of salvation. The most guilty may make an appeal to the love and power of Christ, which shall be as surely, as speedily, as graciously responded to as that which reached the ear of the dying Saviour from the lips of the crucified and penitent thief. Let it be also remembered, by way of warning, that while men, though actually, are not hope-

lessly divided by Christ on the cross, the day is coming when they shall be hopelessly and for ever divided by Christ on the throne. "Then shall He say to those on His right hand, come ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." "Then shall He say also to them on the left hand, depart from Me ye cursed into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels." Let us, therefore, see to it, that we are now on the right side of the cross—that we may be hereafter on the right side of the throne.

V.

Secret Search and Open Acknowledgment.

JOHN xix. 39.

"And there came also Nicodemus, which at the first came to Jesus by night."

THESE few words call up to our view two very remarkable and interesting scenes in the life of Nicodemus, the one of which we meet with quite at the commencement, and the other quite at the close of our Saviour's public ministry. Here, at the cross, we see him playing the part of a faithful disciple, a brave, true-hearted man, as, in association with Joseph of Arimathæa, he pays honour to the body of Jesus. The Evangelist, while celebrating this act of service, parenthetically and significantly remarks of Nicodemus, that *it was he who first came to Jesus by night;* it being to him a matter of surprise that he who was once so timid should be now so brave; that he, who in his first endeavour after a new life, was ashamed to be seen inquiring,

should now, when there is every inducement to maintain secrecy and silence, not be ashamed to confess.

It will be seen at once how these two scenes, which are here placed in apposition, suggest the idea of *secret search and open acknowledgment.* In the visit which Nicodemus paid to Jesus by night, we have an instance of *secret search;* in the homage which he, jointly with Joseph of Arimathæa, paid to the dead body of Jesus, we have an act of *open acknowledgment.* On the first occasion we see him paying a visit of inquiry to Jesus, and availing himself of the darkness and secrecy of night, that he may shelter himself from observation and remark. On the second occasion we see the triumph of His faith, and the avowal of His discipleship, at a time when the faith of the strongest disciples wavered and their courage failed.

These then are the two points which claim our attention.

I. THE INSTANCE OF SECRET SEARCH WHICH WE MEET WITH IN THE VISIT WHICH NICODEMUS PAID TO JESUS BY NIGHT.

II. THE OPEN ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF CHRIST BY NICODEMUS AT A TIME WHEN SUCH ACKNOWLEDGMENT MUST HAVE BEEN ESPECIALLY DIFFICULT.

I. We look at what first claims our regard—THE INSTANCE OF SECRET SEARCH WHICH WE

MEET WITH IN THE VISIT WHICH NICODEMUS PAID TO JESUS BY NIGHT.

In order to understand this visit of the Jewish ruler to Christ, we must glance at some of the previous circumstances, and more particularly at those which, in all probability, led to this interview. Christ, having been baptized by John, entered upon His public ministry, and very speedily attracted general attention to Himself by His words of wisdom and His works of power. His first miracle was wrought at the wedding in Cana of Galilee. Some few days after this, the Jews' Passover being at hand, Jesus went up to Jerusalem that He might observe the feast. It was during this visit He vindicated the majesty of holiness by the purification of the temple—His Father's house—declaring, in the hearing of the Jews, that God was His Father. They, however, lost the word which He spake, in their resentment of the act which He performed. Jesus tarried for some time at the feast, and wrought more than one miracle, so that many who beheld believed on His name. Their faith, however, was not, for the most part, a genuine faith, and, therefore, He did not entrust Himself to all who seemed, for a season, willing to recognise His claims and to espouse His cause. He knew what was in them—knew that they were not trustworthy.

But while this was the case with some, there

were others who were provoked by what they saw and heard, to earnest and sincere inquiry. Of this we have proof in the visit which Nicodemus paid to Jesus by night, an account of which has been preserved for us by John in the third chapter of his Gospel. The chapter commences with apparent abruptness: "There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: the same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, 'Rabbi, we know that Thou art a Teacher come from God, for no man can do these miracles that Thou doest, except God be with him.'" Suddenly as we are introduced to Nicodemus, the transition of thought is less abrupt than it at first seems. It is not unnatural to imagine that one of those who witnessed the miracles of Christ, referred to in the previous chapter, was Nicodemus, the Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews, a member of the High Council, well versed in all the rabbinical lore, which at that time was so highly esteemed, and we may suppose him to have been looking—with however vague and dim expectation—for the consolation of Israel.

We can see this distinguished master in Israel mingling with the crowd which encircles the young Nazarene Teacher, or, perhaps, in the pride of his official dignity, standing at its very verge, but listening with intent interest to every word which fell from the lips of Christ, and

watching with keenest scrutiny every act performed by Him.

We can conceive of the struggle which was going on in the mind of Nicodemus, as he stood there — the conflict between Pharisaic pride which has been excited, and a desire for the truth, which is too strong to be repressed. These are strange, unwonted words to which he has listened! And then these miracles!—there can be no doubt as to their reality—their genuineness. As he ponders these words and works of Christ he feels bewildered—he knows not what to say—he knows not how to act. There, presenting itself to him more and more clearly, was the conclusion from which he shrank, but towards which he surely gravitated: *No man can do these miracles, unless God be with him—however much then His doctrine may be distasteful to us, He must be a teacher sent from God.*

It is not unreasonable to suppose that with some such half-acknowledged conviction as this, Nicodemus went home that afternoon, feeling as he had never felt before—anxious, thoughtful, perplexed. He is in utter doubt as to the course he shall pursue in reference to this Jesus of Nazareth, whose teaching has so interested and so unsettled him. He cannot forget what he has heard, he cannot shake off the impressions that have been produced. He would like to learn

more concerning this new way, this better life, but he is held back by many considerations from going to Jesus. He thinks the matter over—this new Teacher has no social position, no sanction of human authority; many of His words are strange and startling, manifestly inconsistent with prevailing and orthodox belief; but then, these strange words are sustained by undeniable, unmistakable miracles which no mere man could perform! He cannot rest away from Jesus; he cannot make up his mind to go to Jesus. This great rabbi Nicodemus feels that he is so well-known that he cannot take a step unobserved, and he is unwilling to take this step which would be so certain to provoke general and censorious remark. What would the Pharisees say? What would the members of the Council say? What would the people of Jerusalem say? What would all these say and think if I were to be found going to consult this Nazarene? Thus, wishing to go, he is hampered and held back by the fear of man. The struggle goes on, and as it does the day wastes and the night advances. The city is now wrapped in shadow and silence, the streets have grown quiet, with a stillness which is only broken by the cry of the watchman or the measured tread of the guard. Like lightning the thought flashes across the mind of Nicodemus, Why should I not go now—this night—at once? And taking no further counsel with

himself, he wraps his robe about him and goes forth into the dark night, and, with hurried and excited step, he wends his way to the house where Jesus lodged. He is there—the struggle is renewed—shall he go on, or go back? There is yet opportunity to return. His heart flutters, his hand trembles, his voice chokes. But having gone so far, he determines to go on; his hand presses on the latch, the door opens, and the Jewish doctor finds himself face to face with the young Nazarene.

Jesus had noticed Nicodemus in the crowd, had watched the play of varying emotion on his face as he stood there listening to the great truths of the kingdom: Jesus was waiting for him to come that night, and now greets him with a look of cordial welcome. Though he came thus by night, and secretly, he was gently received and kindly treated; for if Jesus saw in him somewhat of human fearfulness and human pride, He saw also much of earnest desire and strong conviction.

And now that the great rabbi is there, in the presence of the young Jewish Teacher, what does he say? He has been used to speak to his fellow-men—speak wisely and well. He is a man of ready utterance, of subtle thought, of self-possessed habit; but now he is the subject of strong and over-mastering emotion, which renders speech difficult, almost impossible.

" For words are weak and most to seek,
When wanted fifty-fold,
And then if silence will not speak,
The trembling lip, and changing cheek,
There's nothing told."

It was so with this great master in Israel. His self-possession had never, perhaps, failed him before; but now, instead of speaking out, boldly and distinctly, what he had made up his mind to say before he started, he can only stammer forth the declaration, "Rabbi, we know that Thou art a Teacher come from God; for no man can do these miracles that Thou doest, except God be with him." There he stops. There is nothing told. There is no question asked—there is no problem stated—there is no request preferred; and yet those few stammering words *told Christ all.* He at once discerns—He presently reveals the secret thoughts and purposes of this man's heart.

Nicodemus goes to Christ, influenced, as we have said, by what he has seen and heard; but, as is often the case with the first visit paid to the Saviour, he goes only with a vague, indeterminate purpose. In our approaches to Christ, we are not unfrequently like the ancient king—we want the interpretation, though we cannot tell the dream. Nicodemus is conscious of a strange, irrepressible craving. He has thoughts and feelings which lie too deep for utterance.

He goes to Christ as to a divinely-sent teacher, with the hope that he may find in Him one who can help him out of his difficulty—one who will discern and satisfy his unuttered, and, indeed, unutterable need. He goes with the dim, instinctive belief that Jesus will be able to afford him the guidance he requires, and he finds what he looks for—One ever ready to respond to "the soul's sincere desire, uttered or unexpressed." Nicodemus does not himself explain—indeed, could not himself explain—what his difficulties were; but we learn much—learn all we need to know from our Saviour's reply to the unuttered question of the heart.

His difficulties evidently had respect to that *kingdom of God*, of which Christ so constantly discoursed, and the conditions of entrance to which He so clearly insisted on. Nicodemus, as he listened to Christ, would, as a Jew, a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews, have some of his most dearly cherished convictions shaken as to his personal relations to that Divine kingdom, of which he had hitherto accounted himself inalienably a member, not because of any condition of heart, but because he was a Jew—a descendant of Abraham.

Let us try to conceive what must have been the feelings of Nicodemus, as he listened to the declarations of Christ concerning the kingdom of God—as that which comes not with observa-

tion, has its seat in the heart, enlisting the affections, and exercising a subduing and dominating power over the will—a kingdom utterly dissimilar from that of which the Jews dreamt; consisting, as it did, not in meat or in drink, in any outward, ritual observance, but in righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost. What must have been his feelings as he listened to such an exposition of the law as that with which we are furnished in the sermon on the Mount? How must his confidence have been shaken, when he found out that the law was to be regarded not merely or mainly as a code regulative of the actions of life, but as a law which bears upon the hidden springs of life—which sets forth God as demanding, not merely abstinence from certain enumerated crimes, and the performance of certain carefully-prescribed duties, but as requiring the unlimited love and allegiance of the heart, and accounting every offering unworthy, and every service imperfect, not originating therein!

If such be God's kingdom, Nicodemus feels that, instead of being within it, he is certainly without it. He knows now—alas, how well!—that he is not influenced by supreme love to God; that he is neither poor in spirit nor meek in heart; and that the law, as interpreted by Jesus, he has habitually broken, and not uniformly kept. As he turns the matter over in his

mind, the conviction grows stronger that he cannot, by any effort of his own, become *that* which he confessedly is not. Had a merely bodily service been demanded, he might have met that demand. Had he been bidden to fast, or feast, he might have done so. Had he been enjoined to cast some great contribution into the Temple treasury, the offering might have been forthcoming. Had he been commanded to go forth on some long and perilous pilgrimage, or to endure some horrible torture, he might have obeyed. But this giving the love of the heart he feels to be quite beyond his control; sullenly, or defiantly, the heart goes on its old way; nor will its love go forth upon any compulsion but one, and that he has not yet even thought of.

Here, then, is Nicodemus—where many have been since—feeling that he must have something which by no effort of his own he can secure, in order to enter, in order even to see God's kingdom. What, in such a strait, can he do? Nothing so well as that which in his perplexity he does—*go to Jesus.*

He goes with the declaration, "Rabbi, we know that Thou art a Teacher come from God;" *i.e.*, "I know Thou art right in what Thou hast said, in what Thou hast demanded, but"—this seems to have been the unuttered confession of the heart—"I cannot meet Thy demand; I have tried and failed—terribly, signally failed; and

now I come to Thee, who art a Teacher sent from God, for light, for help, for deliverance."

Christ in His reply, "Except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God," recognises the difficulty, but does not clear it away, He even presents it in a more formidable light. He tells the Jewish ruler that he cannot do the things he has been seeking to do, for in his present state they are impossible. He must have a new life—a life different from the present one; he must be born again, born from above, before he can even see the kingdom of God.

But here a new question emerges. How is this principle to be secured? "How can a man be born when he is old?" How can this new and better life be obtained? How can the dispositions and habits of the old life be reversed?

Christ does not at once answer this question. He only urges again the absolute necessity of a new life, and draws the clearest distinction between the earthly and fleshly life which we live here, and that Divine, spiritual life to participate in which is our profoundest need. Thus far, then, Nicodemus seems not to have got much help, but only to have had deepened and intensified his sense of incompetence and ignorance; and *this was his first need.*

Sad, however, would his case have been had Christ left him there in all the misery of conscious ignorance and inability. Sad would have been his

case had Christ furnished no answer to the question, "How can these things be?"—the practical, intelligible answer to which must ever constitute the good news. Little seems to have been done so far, yet much has been done. Nicodemus is a more humble man; he has a keener perception and a deeper sense of his own ignorance and weakness: and now, the preparatory work having been done, he is gradually led up to what is the kernel and core of the Gospel mystery, the manifestation of God's pardoning love in Christ. "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through Him might be saved. He that believeth on Him is not condemned; but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved. But he that doeth truth cometh to

the light, that his deeds may be made manifest that they are wrought in God." In these few words have we the Gospel preached in the utmost simplicity, and with the utmost fulness; and we may reasonably suppose that the Gospel message, thus Divinely proclaimed, was there and then received, Nicodemus mingling faith with hearing. Of this, however, we are here told nothing. The curtain falls, and the narrative of this remarkable interview terminates as abruptly as it commences.

II. We notice in the second place, THE OPEN ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF CHRIST BY NICODEMUS, AT A TIME WHEN SUCH ACKNOWLEDGMENT MUST HAVE BEEN ESPECIALLY DIFFICULT.

Though, at the close of that visit he paid to Jesus by night, he passes away so suddenly and so completely from our view, this is not all that we know of Nicodemus. We meet with him twice again. The Gospel celebrates not merely his *secret search*—this visit which he paid to Jesus by night—shunning observation and remark. The same Gospel also celebrates *his open acknowledgment of Christ* on two different occasions. The first reference we meet with occurs at the close of the seventh chapter of John's Gospel, where Nicodemus is described as speaking a bold word for Christ in the Council. In the other passage we have him, in conjunction with Joseph of Arimathæa, making a grander

acknowledgment, and rendering a more honourable, because more arduous, service; his faith in Christ declaring itself most heroically, and his love proving most loyal, at a time when everything conspired to discredit faith and discourage love.

Nicodemus has been claimed as a sort of patron saint of secret disciples; and his conduct in going to Jesus by night has been often referred to as affording a Scriptural warrant for the secret and unavowed following of the Lord. This opinion, however, rests on an evident misunderstanding of Scripture, and the two passages in which we have subsequent reference to Nicodemus seem expressly designed to save us from falling into such a mistake. In each case where the Evangelist records the open acknowledgment of Nicodemus, he is careful to remind us that he is speaking of the same man who at first went to Jesus by night. Whatever, then, he may have been in his original approach to Christ, he does not continue to conceal his attachment to the despised Nazarene. In the Council and at the Cross we see the man who, at first, secretly inquired, making bold, open acknowledgment of his regard for Jesus.

Joseph of Arimathæa seems to have been a man of the same kind. They both, in the earlier stages of their religious experience, courted silence and secrecy; but with their broadening

and deepening experience, there was associated the readiness to avow their love to Christ in times and circumstances of great danger. For a while the fear of man, the restraining power of the world, held them back; but at last we see the mighty constraint of Christ's love dominant and triumphant—the secret inquirers become open and bold confessors.

The powers which, for a while, held back these men are still operating, and against them we have all need to be upon our guard. By a variety of influences many are held back from an open following of the Lord. It cannot be too strongly insisted on, it cannot be too clearly recognised, that the natural issue of religious life in the soul, is the appropriate manifestation and avowal of that life before the world; our love to Christ can no more be hidden than Christ's love to us. Yet, with all that may be said against secret discipleship, how many are there who entertain the hope that they are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, who shrink from making any avowal of the fact, from declaring themselves on His side, from enrolling themselves among His followers? They flatter themselves with the idea, and it is a very mistaken and mischievous one, that it is enough if they are right in heart, though there be no outward intelligible acknowledgment of Christ. No doubt *the great thing* is to believe with the heart; but that is not the

only thing—there is to be also confession with the mouth. Confession without faith is worse than useless; faith without confession is not enough. In God's Word these things are found in fellowship, and what God has joined together, we may not, either in theory or practice, put asunder. The confession of Christ before men is never referred to as an optional thing. There is the time of secret search as well as of open acknowledgment. There is, with most, a time of secrecy and silence—a going to Jesus by night. But though, at first, we may go to Jesus by night, having found what we secretly sought for, we must not shrink from open acknowledgment—acknowledgment in the light of day, acknowledgment in the Council and at the Cross—acknowledgment, if need be, in the presence of a mocking, incredulous, persecuting world. How full, both of encouragement and warning, are the words of our Divine Redeemer, and there was never greater need for men to lay them to heart: "Whosoever, therefore, shall confess Me before men, him will I confess also before My Father which is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny Me before men, him will I also deny before My Father which is in heaven." May there be given to each one of us grace to witness a good confession! As with Nicodemus, so with us. May secret search be followed by open acknowledgment!

VI.

The One Cross: The Threefold Crucifixion.

GALATIANS vi. 14.

"*God forbid that I should glory, save in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto Me, and I unto the world.*"

WHO, that has any conception of what the Cross means—who, that has any true idea of what it symbolises, does not sympathise with the exultant cry of the apostle, "God forbid that I should glory, save in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ?" We are not to conclude, however, from this exclamation, that the Apostle regarded with superstitious or idolatrous veneration the material Cross itself on which his Divine Redeemer suffered; that he went about with any tangible representation of it hanging from his neck or girdle, to which he could point in preaching, or before which he could bow in prayer. The Apostle Paul was a man of altogether another sort. He carried the Cross in his heart, and showed the influence of it in his life. Nor is

there any need for wonder that he should thus glory and boast in the Cross. Was he not himself a trophy of its power? Had he not seen, wherever he preached the Cross, the power of God declaring itself, subduing men, and some of the most unlikely of men, to the obedience of the faith? We have more reason than had even the Apostle to glory in the Cross; for, besides those earlier successes which he witnessed, or of which he heard, we have presented to our view a succession of triumphs which distinguish and adorn the annals of more than eighteen centuries.

Who that lifts his eyes to the Cross, that has any sense of its grandeur and glory, does not feel well-nigh overborne thereby? Who can take the measure of the Cross? Who can form any adequate idea of the sin for which the sacrifice of the Cross is the propitiation? Who can estimate the height and depth, the breadth and length of that love of which the Cross is the enduring symbol and memorial? Who can put a limit to those mighty and beneficent influences which silently and ceaselessly stream forth from the Cross as from the one throbbing centre of life, health, and blessing, to a suffering and sin-stricken world? Who can gaze unmoved on the Cross of Calvary—on that illustrious, that Divine sufferer, who in His own body bare our sins upon the tree?

Yet, familiar as we are with the fact, it does at times seem to us very wonderful that God in His wisdom should have ordered that these ideas should be associated with, that these healing, life-giving influences should stream forth from the *Cross*. Is it not strange that the material instrument of inflicting the most cruel and ignominious punishment should in our minds become inseparably linked with all that is most sublime, pure, benevolent, and god-like, that the children of men have ever witnessed? Is it not strange that, seen through the centuries which have been distinguished by its triumphs, a Cross should appear, standing out in grand relief against the excellent glory which marked the commencement of Christianity, and stand there as the pledge of that more excellent glory which shall distinguish its consummation?

In this Cross the Apostle gloried when he wrote this letter to the Galatians. In this same Cross has the Church of the living God gloried ever since. Just as the rich man glories in his riches, and the strong man in his strength; just as the learned man glories in his learning, and the noble in his honourable distinctions; just as Paul himself once gloried in his Pharisaic zeal and righteousness, so does he now glory in the Cross of Christ. It is all in all to him. The Cross, the crucified One, the great doctrines of

the Gospel which cluster round the Cross, so completely dominated every other thing, that the Apostle felt it was the very burden of his mission and his ministry to preach the Cross, and he could say, as though he were saying the simplest and most natural thing in the world, "I am determined to know nothing among men, but Jesus Christ, and Him crucified."

It is true that Paul tells us in his epistles that he does rejoice and glory in other things besides the Cross; but we cannot fail to observe that he only glories in them as they stand in some kind of relation to the Cross. He says, "Most gladly, therefore, will I rather glory in my infirmities." Do we ask why he glories in these? The answer is instantly forthcoming, "That the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore, I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak then I am strong." In the same way he tells us, without any reserve, that he gloried in his converts: writing to the Thessalonians, he says, "Ye are our glory and our joy." But he rejoiced and gloried in them, not in a spirit of self-complacency, but as they afforded proof of the saving and sanctifying power of the Gospel of Christ. While then he gloried in other things, it was only as they were rendered glorious by the glory of the Cross, and helped by reflecting it, to enhance the honours

of his Divine Redeemer. After all, he could say with perfect sincerity, "God forbid that I should glory save in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ."

When the Apostle exclaimed, "God forbid that I should glory save in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, whereby the world is crucified unto me and I unto the world," he evidently regarded *the One Cross as the instrument of a threefold crucifixion.* And when we are invited, as by this passage we are, to consider the One Cross as the instrument of a threefold crucifixion, we shall find that the subject claiming our attention, so far from being one of merely speculative interest, is one of the greatest practical and personal importance. We shall derive no benefit from the Cross if, while seeing in it the instrument of the Saviour's crucifixion, we do not feel so related to it and to Him as to be able to say with the Apostle, "By it the world is crucified to me, and I unto the world." Wherever the saving benefits which flow from the death of Christ are enjoyed, the Cross will be the instrument whereby the believer is crucified unto the world, and the world unto him.

Let us, then, place ourselves where the Apostle stood, and regard the Cross as it was regarded by him. He gloried in the Cross on several different accounts.

I. HE GLORIED IN THE CROSS AS THAT ON

WHICH THE LORD JESUS CHRIST WAS CRUCIFIED.

II. HE GLORIED IN THE CROSS AS THAT WHEREBY THE WORLD WAS CRUCIFIED UNTO HIM.

III. HE GLORIED IN THE CROSS AS THAT WHEREBY HE WAS CRUCIFIED UNTO THE WORLD.

I. We see that THE APOSTLE GLORIED IN THE CROSS AS THAT ON WHICH THE LORD JESUS CHRIST WAS CRUCIFIED. If we would glory in the Cross we must view it as the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ; that which was the instrument of His crucifixion; that on which He suffered and died. The Cross, which otherwise would have only lived in the memories of men as an antique instrument of torture, having been rendered illustrious by the glory of the Divine Sufferer, now shines forth before our eyes as the grandest and noblest object in the world. Commanding, as it does in an ever-increasing degree, the attention and admiration of men, it is but reasonable we should inquire in what way the Cross has become thus distinguished.

With the historical facts of the crucifixion we are all so familiar that there is no need to recapitulate them. We all know under what circumstances Jesus of Nazareth, who, during his three years' ministry among His countrymen, had become widely known as a religious teacher and a

worker of miracles, was, at the instigation of His determined and unprincipled enemies, condemned to death after a hasty and informal trial, and immediately afterwards crucified outside the city, between two well-known malefactors who were at the time under sentence of death and awaiting execution.

If these be looked at merely as so many historical facts, they are, unquestionably, interesting —they are, in some respects, wonderful; but we cannot, while so regarding them, understand the esteem in which they have been held from that time to this, and the influence which they have exerted, and seem still destined to exert.

If we go back to the Apostolic period, we encounter this singular fact, that the Apostles in their preaching, while dwelling generally upon the life of Christ, His works and words, dwelt especially upon His death, His crucifixion. It was of Christ and Him crucified that they chiefly talked. It was the Cross to which they continually pointed. This is a circumstance well calculated to excite surprise on every supposition but one—that in their judgment some very extraordinary importance attached to the Cross and crucifixion of Jesus. Unless they believed that very much depended on their doing so, it is perfectly unaccountable that they should so constantly and prominently have set forth the death of Christ, and the peculiarly ignominious manner

of it. It is evident that they might have preached Christ in quite another way. They might easily have so preached Christ as to cause the offence of the cross to cease. Very interesting and instructive and eloquent sermons might they have preached, dwelling on the details of Christ's life, the wisdom of His words, the benevolence of His deeds, and, with just a dash of Judaism here, and with just the slightest tincture of Gentile philosophy there, they might have obviated much of the hostility which they encountered; they might have secured the plaudits of both the Jews and the Greeks, and have reckoned their followers by hundreds, instead of units. But, no! whithersoever they went they would persist in talking about the Cross, in pointing to the Cross; though they were well aware that this very Cross of Christ, which was the constant theme of their ministry, was "to the Jew a stumbling-block and to the Greek foolishness." From that time to this the true successors of the Apostles have been doing the same work, and with such large and ever-growing success that at this moment the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ is the mightiest power in this world.

This is a great mystery, and a mystery which is not cleared up till we remember who it was who suffered and died on the cross of Calvary, and with what purpose, with what design He there suffered. We have to ascertain, then, who

was the Crucified One, and what was the purpose of the crucifixion.

As we stand before that Cross, whom do we see extended upon it? We see Jesus of Nazareth, the very Christ of God, the Son of Mary, indeed, but also, and not less truly, the Son of the Highest. We see Jehovah's fellow and equal; One who did not account it robbery to claim Divine honours—the spotless Lamb of God, who was fore-ordained to be thus slain from the foundation of the world. We see Him of whom Moses and all the prophets spake; we see Him who was the hope and consolation of Israel; we see the great, the promised Deliverer, for whose advent men had waited and longed for ages and generations. If we would understand the mystery of the Cross, we must remember that He is no ordinary sufferer who hangs suspended there. We shall never understand the Cross, never truly value it, never glory in it, unless we regard it as the Cross of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

What, then, we ask, in the next place, is the design, the purpose, the end to be answered by the Crucifixion of Christ? The moment we are convinced that the sufferer on that Cross is a Divine sufferer, we feel sure that some grand, some stupendous result is to be secured by that death on the Cross. We feel sure that there must be some peculiarity in the death of Christ

which distinguishes it from that of all other men. We are by no means satisfied with the explication when we are told that He died thus, that He might leave us an example of suffering and uncomplaining patience. We are not satisfied when we are told that He died as a martyr, that He might attest by His death the truth of the opinions He published in life. A man's dying proves nothing but that which, in a world like ours, scarcely requires proof—that a man can die. It may, under certain circumstances, afford a presumption, more or less strong, in favour of his sincerity in holding given opinions, but it does not tend in the slightest degree to establish the opinions themselves as correct.

The testimony borne by Scripture as to the character and design of Christ's death is very clear and unmistakable. We are taught that His death was voluntary, sacrificial, substitutionary. He died for our sins. He died to make atonement for us. The words of Christ Himself are sufficiently plain: "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life." Elsewhere Christ alludes to Himself as the Good Shepherd that layeth down His life for His sheep. Passing by the evidence contained in Old Testament type and prophecy, let us notice the express and unmistakable testimony borne

by the Apostles, who, one and all, teach us that as sinners we are lost, ruined beyond all the possibilities of self-help, and that we are saved by the sufferings and death of Christ. Two or three quotations will suffice :—"God commendeth His love towards us, in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." "For He hath made Him to be sin for us who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him." "In whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins according to the riches of His grace." "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree." "Who His own self bare our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed." Such are a few of the Apostolic utterances on this point, the meaning of which can scarcely be mistaken, and which may be regarded as fairly representative, in spirit and design, of many other statements.

If, then, these passages of Scripture at all express the purpose—the design of Christ's death, we can scarcely wonder that Paul should have burst forth with the exclamation, "God forbid that I should glory, save in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, whereby the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world."

When we look at the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, we see God's wisdom and power, God's justice and mercy arranging for, and triumphantly securing the salvation of the sinner. We have the great problem solved, with which the unassisted reason of man has proved itself to be so signally incompetent to deal. We there learn how God can be just and yet the Justifier of him who believeth in Jesus; how the law can be magnified and made honourable by the same means which afford inviolable protection to the sinner it has justly condemned. There, at the Cross, do we learn how the angel who heralded the advent of the Saviour could declare that there was to be glory to God in the highest, and yet peace on earth and goodwill towards men. There, as we gaze upon the Cross, do we see how, in the plan of human redemption, mercy and truth, righteousness and peace, meet together—not in contradiction or antagonism, but in close, intimate, harmonious relation. There is no compromise or surrender, no limitation or exclusion on the one side or the other. We see the absolute triumph of love, and the not less absolute triumph of law. We see Divine mercy in trembling, tearful tenderness yearning over the guilty; but at the same time we see absolute justice, in all its unalterable integrity, not surrendering a single demand, but exalted, glorified, transfigured in the light of a Divine love—

a love which, while providing for and rejoicing in the salvation of the sinner, is so manifested as to vindicate, in an unexampled manner, the majesty, the integrity, the justice of God. In this wonderful blending of mercy and justice, in this combined triumph of love and law, do we see the only and sufficient foundation of the sinner's hope. We do not deserve salvation; we cannot earn it; if we are to be saved at all, we must be saved in God's way, through faith in a crucified Saviour. We must look to the Cross —we must cling to the Cross. Whatever else we may do without, we cannot do without that. Whatever else we may have of present and relative value, apart from the Cross we are lost. Well, then, may every saved sinner exclaim with the Apostle, "God forbid that I should glory, save in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ."

II. We notice next, *that the Apostle gloried in the Cross, not only as that on which the Lord Jesus Christ was crucified, but also* AS THAT BY WHICH THE WORLD WAS CRUCIFIED UNTO HIM. On many different accounts did the Apostle glory in the Cross. So far from being insensible to those considerations to which we have already referred, we know from his own writings that they gave a character and a colouring to his entire ministry. No man ever saw more clearly than he that all the doctrines of the

Gospel group harmoniously around the Cross, and stand in intimate and necessary relation to it. But here he alludes to a special ground for glorying in the Cross—the influence it has exerted upon himself, and the change which it has effected in the relations which once subsisted between him and the world. He glories in the Cross as that by which the world was crucified unto him. In the light which radiated from the Cross he saw the world in its true character; he became sensible of its hollowness and worthlessness. Once he loved the world, he lived for the world; it had a charm and attractiveness for him—the things valued by men were valued by him; but now the world has become to him as a dead or dying thing. The idea suggested by the strong and startling figure of our text seems to be this—that as the countenance of a crucified person, distorted by the agonies of death, would lose all its original attractiveness, and be an object from which we should instinctively withdraw our gaze, so, in the judgment of the Apostle, the world had lost its attractiveness by which he once had been charmed. It is to him no longer the same thing it still is to others, that it once was to himself. His estimate of the world was so completely changed that he could say, "But what things were gains to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea, doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of

the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord; for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung that I may win Christ, and be found in Him; not having on mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith."

The Apostle here tells us, not only that he is taking a very different view of the world from that which he once did, but that one great reason why he glories in the Cross is this—that it is the instrument by which the change has been effected; by it the world had become to him a crucified thing, had lost its living power and attractiveness. From the time that he first saw, with eyes of faith, the Cross and the Crucified One, the world had appeared to him as it had never appeared before, and as once he would not have believed it could appear to any one. A believing view of the Cross and the Crucified Saviour works the same change in every instance. Till the light of life streams around us we do not and cannot see the world as it really is. We fancy that it is fair, and we try to persuade ourselves that it is sufficient; but when the true light falls upon it, that which glittered as gold in the glare of an artificial illumination is discovered to be worthless tinsel. When the mask is torn from its face, when the robe of imposture which conceals its deformities falls

away from it, we acknowledge that we have been the victims of a miserable illusion; we feel that such a world can never be our rest—can never satisfy us as our portion. It is crucified to us, or in the very act of being crucified. We have still an eye for the world's material beauty; we still sustain manifold relations to our fellow-men; we have our parts to play in the world's business; we gratefully receive those gifts of Providence which enrich our lives from day to day; the outward fashion of our lives may be but slightly changed: but, if we are partakers of the grace of God, if we have ever fixed the eyes of faith upon the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, we shall feel that the world is not the same thing to us that it once was; it does not exert that living, influential, dominating sway over us that it once did. We are not held in willing captivity by the spell of its fascination; it does not exercise over us the same tyrannous and undisputed authority. We may mourn at times that its influence over us is too great. We may be compelled to admit, with sorrowful humility, that it is not so completely a crucified thing to us as it was to the Apostle, but still we feel that we are not using words which are quite without meaning when we say, "God forbid that I should glory, save in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, *by which the world is crucified unto me.*"

III. We notice next, *that the Apostle gloried*

in the Cross of Christ because it was the instrument of yet another crucifixion: IT WAS THAT BY WHICH HE WAS CRUCIFIED UNTO THE WORLD. Through the influence of the Cross of the Lord Jesus Christ, the world had become dead to Him, He had become dead to the world. As crucified, the world had lost its charms—its attractiveness for the Apostle; as crucified, the Apostle had lost his desires for the world. His nature has been impressed with a new character, his will has received a new bias, his affections now flow forth in a new direction, and fasten upon a new and more worthy object.

We are taught here in what way this purely personal result was secured. The same light which revealed the worthlessness and insufficiency of the world, revealed the preciousness and sufficiency of the Saviour. Many men by repeated disappointments are led to turn away in disgust from a world which is always promising satisfaction, but which never satisfies; but who in turning away from the world do not feel that they have anything better to turn to. It was not so with the Apostle. He made a twofold discovery. He had had revealed to him, if not simultaneously, at least in swift succession, the worthlessness of the world and the preciousness of Christ; and it was this view which he had of Christ, when it pleased God to reveal His Son in him, which so effectually

weaned the Apostle from the world that he could speak of himself as dead to it—as crucified to it. Every one familiar with the writings of Paul must have observed how this idea, variously expressed, is constantly occurring. With him, life in Christ involves the idea of death to sin—death to the world. "Know ye not," he says, "that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into His death? Therefore we are buried with Him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of His death, we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection; knowing this, that our old man is crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin."

The Apostle Paul rejoiced, gloried in the Cross of Christ, because of this, that by it he was crucified unto the world. Having been led to believe in Christ, and to love and trust Him as his Saviour, he longed to be like Christ, to be conformed to His example, to be made meet to dwell with Him in glory; and he rejoiced, he gloried, in the crucifixion of the world and of his own corrupt and sinful nature, because hindrances in the way of his sanctification were thus removed.

If we leave out of account the figure of our text, the meaning of the Apostle amounts to this—that he gloried in the Cross of the Lord Jesus Christ, not merely because he saw in it the means of his deliverance from the guilt and punishment of sin, but also because of its sanctifying power and influence. In the Cross we have revealed to us God's method of securing holiness in heart and life. The Gospel makes known to us, and places within our reach, salvation, in the broadest and truest sense of the word. It is salvation not only from suffering, but salvation from that which is the cause of all suffering—sin. The same Cross to which we owe our justification is the means of securing our sanctification. That Cross on which the Lord Jesus suffered as our sacrifice and substitute, is that whereby the world is crucified unto us, and we are crucified unto the world. Let us, then, stand where the Apostle stood, and, viewing the Cross as the instrument of a threefold crucifixion, we shall be able—ever putting more and more meaning into our words—to exclaim with him, "GOD FORBID THAT I SHOULD GLORY, SAVE IN THE CROSS OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST, WHEREBY THE WORLD IS CRUCIFIED UNTO ME, AND I UNTO THE WORLD."

VII.

The Eaglets and the Nest.

DEUTERONOMY xxxii. 11, 12.

"*As an eagle stirreth up her nest, fluttereth over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, beareth them on her wings; so the Lord alone did lead him, and there was no strange God with him.*"

THIS song of Moses is an exceedingly beautiful and interesting portion of Old Testament Scripture. We are here introduced to the lawgiver and prophet of Israel just before the termination of his life. He feels that it is drawing to a close, that the shadows of death are descending, and that he must soon be gathered to his fathers; and we may regard this song as the sublime and pathetic farewell which he addressed to that people, whom he had been instrumental in delivering from bondage, and had now for so long a period guided in the wilderness. It must have been a hard task to say farewell to a people whom, with all their faults, he loved so well, and whose interests lay closer to his heart than aught else, save the honour of that God whose people

they were, and whose servant and prophet he ever felt himself to be.

With the far-reaching eye of prophecy he sees the future history of this remarkable nation spreading out before him, and he who has spent so many years in the service of God and of God's people, spends his last breath in magnifying the God of Israel and the Israel of God. He knows something both of the one and the other, and looking back upon the past, and looking on into the future—at the very close of his life—he declares that, in his judgment, there is no God like the God of Israel, no people like the Israel of God.

When we look back upon that early Hebrew history we feel that it is to us something more than history; in it we have presented to us pictorially, or rather, dramatically, the history—and as to leading outline—the experience of God's Church in every age. We feel that we are reading our own history in the history of Israel. If we look upon that ancient record as a whole, with open, candid eye, believing, that God in whatever He does to one man, to one nation, intends to instruct others, to instruct all; if we read the Old Testament thus, remembering that what happened to those old Hebrews, who seem in so many respects widely separated from us, happened not for their sakes only, but for ours also, upon whom the ends of the world have

come, we shall thank God for having put that varied and oftentimes sorrowful experience on record. As we read this song, which was sung so many ages and generations ago, we find much in it that is profitable for comfort, instruction and reproof; we feel that what found its fulfilment in the experience of God's ancient people Israel, is finding its fulfilment in the experience of God's people to-day. We can put ourselves in their place and substitute the first person for the third. Still the Lord's portion is His people, and the lot of His inheritance, and we can say—He found us in a desert land, and in the waste howling wilderness, He has led us about and instructed us, and has kept us as the apple of His eye.

Just so are we able to rejoice in the assurance conveyed to us by means of the striking and beautiful similitude which we meet with in the words of our text: "As an eagle stirreth up her nest, fluttereth over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, beareth them on her wings; so the Lord alone did lead him, and there was no strange God with him."

There is scarcely anything in nature, there is scarcely anything in human life, which is not employed in Scripture for the purpose of illustrating some idea or aspect of spiritual truth; and especially are these similitudes used to set vividly before us those peculiar relations which

God sustains to His own people, and those gracious offices which He discharges for them.

It is so here. What the eagle is to her young, that the Lord is to His people—the nearer and narrower reference being to His ancient people Israel, with a larger and abiding allusion to those tender and gracious relations which He sustains to the true, spiritual Israel in every age; for what God was to the one, He is to the other.

We see first the young eaglets in their nest, living in warmth and comfort, well provided for, well protected. When they are old enough to leave the parental nest, and use their own pinions, we see the parent bird encouraging and even forcing them to exercise their untried powers. They would never leave the nest, and spread their wings in flight, unless compelled to do so; and therefore the old bird brings to bear upon them this necessary compulsion. She forces them forth by stirring up, disturbing, perhaps, utterly destroying the nest. She then teaches them how to fly, fluttering over them, setting them an example, sustaining them in their first feeble attempts, spreading abroad her wings, taking them and bearing them on her wings. The same loving, parental care which before had been displayed to them while they were enjoying the comfort of the undisturbed nest, is still declaring itself, though in a very different, and what must have seemed to the young birds,

a much less pleasant way. The parental love which is seen in providing the soft comfort and tender warmth of the nest, for the young unfledged eaglets, is seen afterwards in breaking up the nest, or in rendering it so uncomfortable that the now fully fledged eaglets are glad to leave it.

We have here a picture and a parable. Looking upon the picture which the few words of our text call up, we seem to have given to us, in brief but suggestive form, the history of these young eaglets in three chapters:—

We see first the eaglets in the nest, dwelling there in ease and comfort, happy and contented, under the care of the parent-bird.

We then see the nest stirred up: the young birds subjected to the salutary discipline of, what must at first have been accounted by them, very painful unsettlement.

We last of all see the young eaglets who have left the nest learning to fly, but still enjoying as truly as ever the protection, care and teaching of the parent-bird.

This we may regard—

I. AS ILLUSTRATING GOD'S DEALINGS WITH ANCIENT ISRAEL.

II. AS ILLUSTRATING, NOT LESS REMARKABLY, GOD'S DEALINGS WITH HIS PEOPLE IN EVERY AGE.

I. *We have here* AN ILLUSTRATION OF THE

METHOD OBSERVED BY GOD IN DEALING WITH ANCIENT ISRAEL. We cannot but observe how appropriately and beautifully this similitude brings out to our view the peculiar character of that training and discipline to which the children of Israel were subjected during the earlier period of their history. In the record which has been preserved of God's dealings with them, we have exhibited, in a very remarkable manner, the paternal love, and care and tenderness of God, with occasional and, indeed, not infrequent manifestations of sternness and severity, which were rendered necessary by the obstinate and intractable disposition of the people; but which, rightly regarded, were as truly expressive of the Divine love as God's most tender and gentle treatment of them.

The children of Israel had a soft, warm nest in Goschen at first; but, because they were growing too fond of it, were getting to regard Egypt as a permanent home, and not as a strange country,—were forgetting the traditions and the God of their fathers, the Lord soon began to stir that nest up; as the years rolled on, it became increasingly uncomfortable, at last almost unbearable; yet were they not willing to leave it. They had hard work, and rough usage, and cruel taskmasters, but—slaves as they were—they so loved the fleshpots, and melons, and cucumbers of Egypt, that they were unwilling to leave them

behind, even to escape the degradation and oppression of servitude. Their nest had not only to be stirred up, shaken, rendered uncomfortable, it had to be broken up, rendered uninhabitable. The plagues and terrors of the Lord which fell upon Egypt were designed as much to loosen Israel's hold on Egypt as Egypt's hold on Israel. Egypt has to be made willing to allow Israel to depart; Israel has to be made willing to use the opportunity afforded for escape, has to be convinced that that was no land to dwell in, and that the sooner it was left behind the better. And so the nest is broken up, and the young eaglets are driven forth, who are to build nests for themselves by and by in the rocky fastnesses of Palestine. In the meantime they have to be taught to use their wings—to be taught, and trained and disciplined for the future that is in store for them as a nation.

Why does the eagle break up the nest, and force her young ones from its warm and comfortable shelter? Not that they may be left exposed to storm and tempest on the bleak and barren rocks, to which in fear and weakness they cling, but that, with ever-strengthening pinions, they may learn to soar aloft, and gaze with undazzled eyes upon the sun, and finally claim the vast aërial expanse as their own.

So God did not break up Israel's nest in Egypt, and lead forth His people, that they

might perish uncared for in the wilderness; but those many years of wilderness wandering were designed to educate, exercise, discipline their comparatively untrained powers. When they went forth from Egypt they were an undisciplined multitude, a mere mob of escaped slaves, almost utterly demoralised by their long captivity, unfit to use, unable to appreciate, the liberty which had been conferred upon them, unfit to occupy the land which had been promised to their fathers. During all these forty years in the wilderness we see God doing for His people what, in this picture, we see the mother-bird doing for the young eaglets—teaching them to use their untried powers, and training them to occupy the position which should afterwards be assigned to them. Weak themselves, they often faltered in their flight, and were upborne by the everlasting wings; and, while the discipline to which they were subjected must have often seemed to them rough and hard, yet was it salutary and necessary, there was a needs-be for everything that happened to them. Their training was altogether a Divine training. It was the Lord Himself, and He alone, who did the whole work. There was no strange God among them, no foreign influence contributing to the result. The Lord Himself, who broke up the nest in Egypt, presided over the training of His own people in the wilderness, and finally established them in

the land which He had long before promised unto their fathers, and marked out for their habitation.

II. *We will now notice how this same similitude* ILLUSTRATES THE METHOD WHICH GOD OBSERVES IN DEALING WITH HIS PEOPLE IN EVERY AGE. As we look upon the picture with which we are here presented of the eaglets and the nest, we see *parental love manifesting itself under three different forms :—*

We see it securing the warmth and comfort, the ample provision and sufficient protection which the young birds enjoy in the undisturbed nest.

We see that same love stirring up the nest, rendering it uncomfortable, uninhabitable, and forcing the young birds from it.

We finally see that same love displayed in training and disciplining the untried powers of these young birds, and preparing them to take that position in the world which young, fully-fledged eaglets should.

We have here a parable, as well as a picture, and the spiritual counterpart to all this we may discover in God's dealings with us.

Let us look first at the young eaglets in their nest, under the care and protection of the parent-bird. What a beautiful picture have we here of an easy, comfortable, well-provisioned, well-protected condition of life! The young eagles have

little occasion to dread either danger or want. There is the strong nest, built up far away upon some inaccessible mountain-peak. There are the young ones, enjoying the fostering care, and the warmth and protection, afforded by the broad, outspread wings of the mother-bird. While the male-bird may be seen, with mighty pinions, sweeping hither and thither, laying land and sea under contribution for the support of his young. A happy, unanxious life may these young eaglets live, safe under the care of those whose power to minister to every want, and to protect from every danger, they have never yet had occasion to question.

Well, this is a picture of many of God's dealings with us, of many of His arrangements for us. It is a just representation of our condition in life, sometimes for a long period. Perhaps for years everything goes well and smoothly with us: we have no cause for complaint or anxiety. We are overwhelmed by no great sorrow, impoverished by no great loss; nothing happens to us to fill our eyes with tears, to rend our hearts with anguish. We are as well cared for and protected as the young birds in their nest, and we ought to be as happy and contented as they. All things are made to minister to our necessities, and no harmful influence is suffered to touch us. We have no troubles but such as we foolishly make for ourselves, and no anxieties

but such as result from our mistrusting One in whom we should ever and absolutely confide.

Such a condition of life as this, in which we are largely free from all the graver causes of sorrow and anxiety, may be maintained without any noticeable change for a long while. Those who enjoy such a state of ease, comfort, prosperity, would like it to continue for ever, and are ready to exclaim, exultingly, "This is the way in which God's paternal love and care display themselves." They are right who see in all this, proof of God's parental love.

That is one way in which parental love declares itself; this is another.

A very different picture now presents itself to our view. *We see the nest stirred up*, disturbed; indeed, quite broken up, and destroyed. The young eaglets are no longer enjoying the warmth and comfort of the nest. No longer do we see them resting in contented idleness under the outspread wings of the parent bird; but there they cower, forlorn and disconsolate, upon the ledge of barren rock, looking with sorrowful surprise upon the wreck and ruin of the once comfortable home, in which they rested so happily and so long, but in which they will find a resting place no more. And in what way has that nest been destroyed? Has this work of destruction been wrought by the ruthless hand of man, by the rage of some adventurous beast

or bird, or by the wild force of storm and tempest? No, strange to say, that same parent bird who built that nest, and who so long and so tenderly brooded over it, at last destroyed it; and there are the young eagles wondering why that should be destroyed which they loved so much; and questioning if this breaking up of their nest, can be made to consist with that parental love, which had always before shown itself in cherishing them in the nest.

Just so in human life, do we see the stirring up of the nest. The old conditions of life are changed, and changed, according to our judgment, for the worse. We look with sorrowful surprise upon the wreck and ruin of the home we loved; or, if it be not utterly broken up, it is so changed that it is to us the old home no longer; it is invaded by some great sorrow which renders it for ever desolate; and we are left to mourn the total withdrawal and disappearance of much which was most dear to us. "How is this?" we are ready to exclaim in our bewilderment—"Why is this?"

We know the reason of the stirring up of the nest in the case of the young eaglets. We know why God stirred up what was at first the warm, comfortable nest of the children of Israel in Egypt. It is for the same reason that God stirs up, and, perhaps, breaks up our nest to-day. He sees that we have been in it long enough; that

we are growing too fond of it; that we are regarding it as our permanent abode; that there is on our part no preparedness to leave it. The word comes to us, "Arise, depart, this is not your rest." The word is not obeyed, perhaps scarcely listened to; we cling to the nest, and we say in our hearts, "We will die in our nest." But God says, "No, you have been in this nest long enough." He stirs it up, makes it so uncomfortable that we want to leave it; or utterly destroys it so that we cannot remain in it.

In all this we see the same parental love manifesting itself under a sterner guise; subjecting us to the salutary and necessary discipline of painful unsettlement. These unsettlements, changes, trials, afflictions of life, serve valuable purposes, which cannot be so well answered or at all answered in any other way. Manasseh, when he was afflicted, sought the Lord, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. The Psalmist, who was no stranger to unsettling changes, says, "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now have I kept Thy word.... It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn Thy statutes." Moab was as he was—unchanged, unimproved, because he had been at ease from his youth, not emptied from vessel to vessel, but settled down upon his lees. It was so with the prodigal son; he never thought of returning to his father's house, till after his

foul nest in the far-off land had been thoroughly stirred and broken up. There are many who, because they have no changes, no painful, unsettling changes, fear not God. Many of the providential changes from which we shrink, and of which we complain, are productive of great spiritual good, though in the mean time they are often very painful to flesh and blood.

In this life there is the breaking up of many a nest in which, for a while, we rested in contented idleness or foolish self-confidence—all of which unsettlements are designed to prepare us for the final breaking up of the nest of this present tabernacle, when the soul, at last quite emancipated, shall wing its way to its true, eternal home.

We last of all see *the young eaglets*, who have been driven forth from their nest, *learning to fly*. They are out of the nest, the nest itself is broken up, but they are still enjoying the care, protection, and teaching of the parent bird. This is the end contemplated in stirring up the nest—the young eagles must no longer lie there with folded wings, they must be taught to spread their wings and fly. This, too, is the end to be answered by the painful and unsettling changes of life. God is teaching us to use our wings, to rise above the world, to soar toward the sun.

We should not do this, we should not even think of doing this, unless God prompted us and

taught us; and so He breaks up our nest that we may be ready to use our wings, and then He teaches us how to use them. He not merely tells us what we are to do, but He shows us how we are to do it. See the parent bird teaching the young eaglets to fly: she fluttereth over them, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, beareth them on her wings. Day by day, their strength and skill increase; they can do with less and less assistance, till at last they can emulate the flight of the parent bird herself. So does the Lord teach His people: educating, disciplining powers, which, feeble at first, with exercise, become more vigorous every day. We need not be discouraged if in our first uncertain flights we seem rather to skim the surface of the earth, than soar into the heavens, for we have to do with Him who giveth power to the faint: and to them that have no might increaseth strength; and we are assured that they who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles. We need not fear lest with weakened pinions we falter in our flight and fall, for the everlasting wings are ever ready to spread themselves out beneath us and bear us up.

Let us then remember that we may see God's paternal love not only in the comfortable arrangements of the undisturbed nest: but also, and not less, in the discomfort of painful and unsettling

providences. The same love which builds the nest at first, stirs it up at last. Bearing this in mind let us try and reach the end contemplated in all the varied discipline of life, and instead of settling down in any low-built nest of earthly comfort, spread our wings and rise to contemplate our glorious destiny, even as by-and-by we shall rise to the final and eternal enjoyment of it.

VIII.

A Hard Lesson.

PHILIPPIANS iv. 11.

"I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content."

WE do right in speaking of this as a hard lesson. It is one of the hardest of all the many lessons we have to learn. It is a lesson so hard to learn that but few perfectly learn it. There is only one here and there who is able to say with the Apostle, "I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content." So difficult is this lesson, that when we consider what is to be done, in relation to our own infirmity, we are ready to exclaim, "Who is sufficient for these things?" Nor should we set our hand to so arduous an enterprise as that of reducing the chaos and misrule of our dissatisfaction to the order and harmony of a Divine content, but for our recollection of those other words, so full of encouragement — "My grace is sufficient for thee."

As we listen to this utterance of the Apostle the thought occurs to us, that the same form of words may be used to express sentiments that are widely different—sentiments which must, according to circumstances, appear commendable or reprehensible in the highest degree. If we take the words of our text as uttered by the Apostle Paul, they express a state of mind which must be regarded as one of the loftiest attainments of Christian life. But, as it is a virtue to be contented in some circumstances, so is it a virtue to be discontented in others; and a man can scarcely sink lower in this world than to be able to feel and express content in the midst of circumstances which, if rightly apprehended, would awaken loathing and an unappeasable longing for deliverance. And, though we have to celebrate the praises of contentment, we may have to remind you, paradoxical as the saying sounds, that the discontent which God awakens is the condition of realising the content which God gives.

All men are seeking contentment—some in one way, some in another; but they only attain to it who are fellow-learners with the Apostle in God's own school. Men may tell us what contentment is—what a beautiful, what a desirable thing it is. They may enumerate many reasons why we should be contented—they may point out clearly enough the road which ought to lead

to contentment; and yet they and we may remain the most discontented of mortals. God alone can enable anyone to say from the heart, "I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content."

The connection in which these words occur is so plain, that there is no need to dwell upon it at any length. The Apostle has been urging the Philippians to seek that freedom from care which is one of the distinctive privileges of Christian life. He would have them free, not from all reasonable care, but from that worrying, distrustful care, which would prove as injurious to them as it was dishonouring to God. There is a care which we are bound to exercise in reference to the interests both of soul and body; but this legitimate and even commendable carefulness, is easily distinguishable from that corroding, fretting anxiety, that spirit of unbelieving care, from which every Christian should seek instant and complete deliverance.

The Apostle not only urges these Philippians to be careful for nothing, but he indicates the cure for excessive and morbid carefulness. The result is not to be attained by reliance on an arm of flesh, the accumulation of worldly treasures, the raising up of material safe-guards; but in a more simple and effectual way, by the commital of themselves and all their interests to God. Prayer is the cure for care. Is any one,

says the Apostle, unduly careful about anything? he has a remedy within his reach. In this uncomfortable, distracting sense of the word, he need be careful for nothing, for in everything he can and should make known his requests unto God, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving. Let him but do this, and not only shall he be set free from all undue care, but the peace of God which passeth all understanding, shall keep his heart and mind through Christ Jesus.

The Apostle then glances at two kinds of commendable carefulness. "Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, if there be any praise, think on these things." They cannot, he reminds them, be too careful in cultivating these graces and excellencies of Christian life. And in a later verse, he commends their care of himself, which had led them to make provision for his necessities. The Apostle in this eleventh verse seems to meet, by anticipation, an objection which some less candid hearer or reader of this letter might advance. Such an one might say: "It is all very well for the Apostle Paul to talk to us about contentment and freedom from care; but has he himself learned the lesson in which he is instructing us? Do we not see in the very reference we have here to his own necessities, and

our supply of them, that he is not so completely indifferent to such matters as some suppose?" To this he replies by declaring: "Not that I speak in respect of want; for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. I know both how to be abased, and how to abound; everywhere and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me. Notwithstanding, ye have well done, that ye did communicate with my affliction."

The Apostle Paul assures the Philippians that he has learned the lesson which he wishes them to learn. With the utmost sincerity and simplicity he can say, "I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content." In further dwelling upon these words, let us notice:—

I. THE APOSTLE'S ATTAINMENT.

II. THE CHRISTIAN'S AIM.

I. THE APOSTLE'S ATTAINMENT. — The Apostle makes allusion to his own personal experience. He tells us that he has learned—that he has been taught—in whatsoever state he is, therewith to be content. These words were spoken with confidence and humility. We cannot but notice, in reading the epistles of Paul, how free he is from all reserve in speaking of himself. Does he allude to some Christian grace or attainment by which he is distinguished?

he does so in the most free and unfettered manner, for he feels that he is only speaking of the life of Christ which is manifesting itself in his mortal body. Here, for instance, in referring to what he has learned, he speaks of his attainment in no spirit of self-complacency; but he acknowledges that he owes it to Christ, who makes him strong for all things.

"I have learned," he says, "I have been taught, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content." It is a personal matter with him—a matter of individual experience. It is a lesson which he himself has learned; and a careful examination of the Apostle's history convinces us that in saying this he uttered no vain boast. He, if any man, acquired the secret, and learned the lesson of true content. He knew how to be abased and how to abound; how to be full and how to be hungry.

The expression *I have learned*, not merely presents us with the fact of acquisition, but is suggestive of the additional fact that difficulty has been experienced in acquiring what has been attained. There is no royal road for learners. "I have learned," says the Apostle, "I have been taught, to be contented at all times, and in all things; but the lesson has been *a hard one*. I have been many years learning this lesson. Though I occupy this position of advantage now, I look back upon a long series of van-

quished difficulties. This attainment, in the possession of which I now rejoice, did not come to me naturally—did not come to me easily. I did not acquire this lesson by instinct—by intuition. The insubordination—the disaffection of my nature—was not quelled at once. Little by little was the victory won; but now, thank God, I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content."

There is a difficulty involved in all Christian attainment. In following after what is good, we feel that, if we are making headway at all, it is against a strong adverse current. All this natural difficulty was experienced by the Apostle Paul, and nothing but the victorious energy of Divine grace enabled him to overcome. This he himself here acknowledges. Weak in himself, as other men, he was able for all things, through Christ who strengthened him.

In some cases, what we may speak of as the natural difficulty, which is experienced in learning this lesson, appears, at least, much less formidable, owing to some peculiarity of temperament, or favourable arrangement of circumstances. This was not the case with the Apostle Paul.

It is easier for some men to be content, or, rather, to appear contented, than others. There are people of a sluggish, apathetic temperament, who will vegetate anywhere, and who, because they are too indolent to improve their condition,

try to persuade themselves and others that they are contented with it. But the Apostle Paul was not a member of this class. He was a man of untiring activity,—a man who, had he not become a Christian, would have manifested a soaring and insatiable ambition, and one who, in virtue of his great abilities, would have certainly stood in some one or other of the world's high places. To forego all these prospects, to curb this spirit, to pursue such a course as he did, and, after all, to be able to say, "I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content," suggests the existence of a difficulty in the case of the Apostle, which only those of like temperament can understand; and the vanquishing of which reveals to us the all-subduing power of Divine grace.

As there is often a peculiarity of temperament, so is there often a peculiarity of circumstances, which seems to make contentment easier to some than to others. If we look to the narrative of the Apostle's life, we shall find that the outward circumstances thereof, so far as they had weight with him at all, must have very materially augmented the difficulty.

With some people all things seem to go smoothly and well; their lives are distinguished by the appearance of uninterrupted prosperity—they have all that heart can wish. If we were to speak of their contentment to many, their

reply would be, "It would be a sin and a shame indeed, if such were not contented; but our lot is a very different one. Our way is rough, our fare is hard, our sorrows are many; it is not so easy for us to be content." Let us look at the Apostle, and see if we can discover in the material circumstances of his life anything which will explain, which will account for that spirit of absolute content to which he here gives expression. In writing to the Corinthians (2 Cor. xi. 23—28), he presents us with a summary account of what he had to pass through:— "In labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Besides those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the Churches." Yet, having lived such a life, he could say, "I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content." What a view

does this give us of the glory, the blessedness, the all-sufficiency of true religion!

But the Apostle was distinguished not only by this remarkable contentment, but also by a sublime *discontent.*

He was dissatisfied with himself. Many of the most discontented people in the world are wonderfully self-satisfied. We see the very reverse in the case of the Apostle. He who said, "I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content," said also, "Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended; but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."

He was, though more abundant in labours than any, never satisfied with those labours. Having done all, he was but an unprofitable servant. He was one who could never rest in what was accomplished; he was always looking on to work yet to be done, territory yet to be occupied for the Master.

He was not, he could not be satisfied with the state of the world, while it continued to be so largely subject to the rule and influence of the wicked one.

He was not satisfied with the state of the Church. The ideal Church ever floated before

him as a vision of beauty and perfection, whereas the actually existing Church was marred by many a flaw and blemish.

And, while he was content with all providential arrangements in which he was personally concerned, and knew how to be abased and how to abound, how to be full and how to be hungry; this contented acquiescence in the present arrangements of God, did not prevent him anticipating, with feelings of holy desire, the period when, set free from all earthly imperfection, he should be absent from the body, and present with the Lord. He was willing to remain, but he felt it was better to depart.

The more carefully we study the life and letters of the Apostle Paul, the more significance shall we discover in the words, "*I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content.*"

Passing on from the personal experience of the Apostle Paul, let us notice—

II. THE CHRISTIAN'S AIM.—There can be no doubt that the lesson which the Apostle so perfectly learned, is a lesson which we are all called to learn who profess to be the disciples of the Lord Jesus. The tendency of true religion is to make men contented, and one of the characteristic features of Christian life is, or ought to be, contentment.

If we keep in view the illustration afforded by the life of the Apostle Paul, we shall be aided in

forming a distinct conception of what that true contentment is, which we, as Christians, are called to manifest. Remembering what was his attainment, we shall know what should be our aim.

We see it is not merely the apparent contentment of an indolent, apathetic nature. Some people are so devoid of taste, perception, and sensibility, that, in almost any circumstances, they are able to display an unintelligent acquiescence, which is sometimes miscalled contentment.

It is not the contentment which is the result of vanity and self-conceit. Some persons are so constituted that they regard themselves—their doings and sayings, and indeed everything related to them—with marvellous complacency. Such self-content is not so much a virtue as a disease.

True contentment is not a content which rests on circumstances. Abundance never yet produced content. It may be questioned, even, whether those most remarkable for the abundance which they possess, are not also most remarkable for the discontent they display. If true contentment is ever to be attained to, in a world like this, it must be in virtue of some principle, which shall make us, at least to a large extent, independent of the world and its ceaselessly fluctuating circumstances.

Unless there be some inward principle of contentment, it is as difficult to keep a man contented, as it is to keep a stringed musical instrument in tune. With much delicate manipulation you have brought it into tune; but you cannot keep it in tune long—a slight change in the atmosphere, the touch of a child's hand, the brush of a bird's wing, would put it out of tune at once. We may be content now, because, most rare event! there is a correspondence between us and the circumstances surrounding us; but we change, and the circumstances change not—or they change, and we remain as we were, and content becomes instantly impossible.

Now, it is the very office of true religion to make a man independent of the world. The contentment with which it inspires us is an indwelling principle. The Christian has his treasure within himself, and so he is "well off," let the external circumstances of life be what they may. The word "contentment" means the same thing as the word "containment." We must have the principle—the source of satisfaction within ourselves. This is the very idea of Gospel contentment. There is the incorporation of the bread of heaven—the bread of life, so that we cannot hunger. There is the perpetual up-springing of the water of life within us, so that we cannot thirst.

We cannot describe a feeling; to know what

it is we must experience it. We cannot define contentment; we must be contented to know anything of its nature and blessedness. As we learn from the case of the Apostle, the true contentment we are required to manifest may be, and must be, associated with many forms of virtuous discontent, and may be displayed in the midst of the most painful and distressing circumstances.

True contentment does not come to us of itself. It is not a natural possession; it is an acquisition, an attainment. "*I have learned*," says the Apostle, "in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content." It may, then, be attained; and, if one of the most difficult, it is also one of the most valuable attainments. But it can only be attained in one way. It is a hard lesson, and it can only be learned in God's own school. We must be taught by God's own Spirit.

No one can be content by merely trying to be contented, by resolving to be contented, by persuading himself that he ought to be contented. Men may force themselves to be stoically submissive, resolutely uncomplaining; but Christian contentment is a very different thing, and rests on a very different foundation.

The Christian believer is able to take a view of things which is calculated to cause contentment. A man who has been convinced of his deserts as a sinner, and has had vouchsafed to him a clear vision of God's redeeming love in

Christ Jesus, will not, while his heart is overflowing with gratitude on account of the great salvation, repine at God's arrangements, even though he find that his way on earth is a little rough. He feels, and is ready to acknowledge, that he is not worthy of the least of all God's mercies, and his cry will be—

> "Maker and High Priest,
> I ask Thee not my joys to multiply,
> Only to make me worthier of the least."

He feels that everything is of grace; that he has no claim on, no right in anything. He brought nothing into the world; it is certain he can carry nothing out. He is completely a tenant at will, and God reminds him, in many different ways, that he holds nothing in his own right. Does he receive anything? it is a gift. Does he lose anything? he suffers no wrong. He will say, "The Lord hath given, the Lord hath taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

Besides this, the Christian believer has the assurance, that all things form part of God's plan—that plan, according to which, all things work together for the advantage of God's people. Much may appear dark, confused, mysterious; but he knows that there is light on the other side of the cloud, and he is sure that God doeth all things well.

The Christian, moreover, will remember that,

at longest, his relation to the world is but short; and when most stable, but uncertain. We are but strangers and sojourners, as all our fathers were; and while on our journey homeward we must not account inconvenience and hardship as strange things.

> "What if the bread
> Be bitter in thine inn, and thou unshod
> To meet the flints? At least it may be said,
> 'Because the way is *short*, I thank Thee, God!'"

Now it is of the very nature of true religion to inspire the believer with such sentiments; and you will see at once that in the same proportion that we are led, by the Spirit and grace of God, to cherish such sentiments as these, we shall be able to use for ourselves the words of the Apostle, and say, "I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content."

Some have need to remember that the dissatisfaction which God awakens must go before the satisfaction, the contentment which God gives. The dissatisfaction which the prodigal experienced in the far country led him to think of his long-forsaken, and almost forgotten home, within the sacred and blessed enclosure of which he realised at last a contentment which he had long and vainly sought elsewhere. We must be discontented with ourselves and our condition as sinners, ere we shall seek salvation and satisfaction in Christ. May we all be taught the secret of this true content!

IX.

"The Blessed Awakening."

PSALM xvii. 15.

"As for me, I will behold Thy face in righteousness: I shall be satisfied when I awake with Thy likeness."

WHENEVER we see any man behaving in a remarkable, an exceptional manner, we feel prompted to inquire as to the principles according to which his life is fashioned, and how it comes to pass that he differs so largely in character and conduct from his fellow men. It is impossible to read the life, to study the history of the patriarch David without raising some such inquiry. We have here an expression of one of those grand convictions which gave a distinguishing character to his whole life, and inspired him with confidence in times of the greatest distress and danger. In his darkest hours, amid all the fluctuations of his ever-changeful and oftentimes painful experience, he could turn his sorrowful face toward the heavens, and say to One who was keeping him as the

apple of His eye, and hiding him under the shadow of His wings: "As for me, I will behold Thy face in righteousness; I shall be satisfied when I awake with Thy likeness."

We have no means of determining, with absolute precision, to what particular period and crisis in David's life this Psalm refers; from the Psalm itself we may conclude that the position of the Psalmist at the time alluded to was one of imminent peril, and some expressions seem to indicate the situation described in 1 Sam. xxiii., when David, and his few followers were hemmed in by Saul and his men, and very narrowly escaped being captured by them. However that may be we have reference to some well-remembered season of difficulty and danger, and in this remarkable utterance with which the Psalm is brought to a close, we have the kernel of David's theology, and one of the great supporting and actuating principles of his life.

We are perfectly aware that there are those who would restrict the meaning of these words to very narrow limits, and charge us with the absurdity of an anachronism, in venturing to impute to the patriarch any anticipation, however vague and glimmering, of the great doctrine of the resurrection of the body. We are all, of course, aware that there is a great difference between *dawn* and *daylight;* but so far as we see anything in the dim twilight of the opening

morning, we see precisely the same things which, a little afterwards, stand out more perfectly disclosed in the full blaze of day. So those primitive believers, in the dim light which was then just beginning to disturb the world's darkness, saw in an imperfect, and possibly very confused manner, what we are privileged to see more clearly. Christ has brought to light—out of obscurity into light—life and immortality; and even the doctrine of the resurrection of the body, can only be regarded as peculiarly a New Testament doctrine, inasmuch as it is therein set forth with quite unprecedented distinctness.

The translations of Enoch and Elijah must have had some meaning for God's people in old times. In the Old Testament Scriptures we meet with many passages, like that now under consideration, which indicate the existence of an anticipation, however vague, of that which, in these latter times, has been so distinctly made known unto us. We all know that long prior to the advent of Christ, there was a Jewish sect distinguished for the denial of the doctrine of the resurrection, which denial would have been scarcely remarkable, had not that doctrine been generally received. When Jesus assured Martha that her brother Lazarus should rise again, her prompt reply, "I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day," expresses her participation in what was

the common belief of the Jewish nation at that time. Paul, in pleading before Agrippa, maintained that in teaching the doctrine of the resurrection he was but affirming what was the common hope of Israel. And in the eleventh chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews, after a reference to certain Old Testament heroes and martyrs, we have a statement to the effect that they bravely endured all that they were called upon to suffer, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection.

While then we must not impute to these primitive believers, the same clear and distinct views which we are blessed with who live in Gospel times, we need have no difficulty in supposing that the patriarch David had some prevision of that great and final day, sufficiently bright and distinct to inspire him with hopeful confidence, in this season of distress and danger. No interpretation which does not include this onward allusion, can be regarded as harmonizing, with the remarkable solemnity and emphasis of this utterance. Whatever justification of himself in the sight of his enemies he may have desired; whatever temporal deliverance he may have been anticipating; whatever enlarged sense of the Divine favour he may have expected to be vouchsafed to him in the land of the living, we feel that some expectation, stretching above and beyond all this, was presented to the Patriarch's

mind when he gave utterance to these words. We need not suppose that David was indifferent to such considerations as have been mentioned, but we may reasonably believe that that upon which his heart was supremely set, was a deliverance from all the trials and sorrows of earth, and a blessed entrance upon the joys and privileges of immortality. To this, and to nothing less than this, could he have alluded when his soul burst forth in the exclamation of our text, "As for me, I will behold Thy face in righteousness; I shall be satisfied when I awake with Thy likeness."

As we read these words, they occur to us as expressing a certain gradation of thought, which is worthy of our notice: *I shall be satisfied:* I shall be satisfied *when I awake;* I shall be satisfied when, *in righteousness I behold Thy face, and awake with Thine image.*

I. THE PSALMIST LOOKS FORWARD TO A SATISFACTION WHICH IS TO BE REALISED—"I SHALL BE SATISFIED."

II. HE ASSOCIATES THE REALISATION OF THIS SATISFACTION WITH A DEFINITE PERIOD IN THE FUTURE—"I SHALL BE SATISFIED WHEN I AWAKE."

III. HE TRACES THIS SATISFACTION WHICH IS BY-AND-BY TO BE REALISED TO A DEFINITE CAUSE—"I SHALL BE SATISFIED WHEN IN RIGHTEOUSNESS I BEHOLD THY FACE, AND AWAKE WITH THY IMAGE."

I. The first thing to be noticed is THAT THE PSALMIST LOOKS FORWARD TO A SATISFACTION TO BE REALISED—HIS WORDS ARE "I SHALL BE SATISFIED." He looks wistfully into the future—He is to be satisfied, not here and now, but by-and-by. There is nothing at first sight unusual in the experience of the Psalmist as thus expressed. All men, without exception, are looking forward to a satisfaction, unto which they have never attained in the past. Life is made up of a series of disappointments. The world does not contain probably at this moment one person who is satisfied, and yet does not contain one who is not longing and seeking for satisfaction. The region of perfect satisfaction is a dream-land which is ever skirting our horizon, but which ever recedes as we advance upon it. In seeking satisfaction we are engaged in the pursuit of a phantom which, apparently within our reach, is ever mockingly eluding our grasp. Many much-experienced men of the world agree in assuring us that there is no such thing as real satisfaction—that it is the creation of fancy, and not the veritable possession of man. We have all thought many times that if we could only attain to a certain result, escape the pressure of some care, or the sting of some annoyance, we should be satisfied. We have made that attainment, we have effected that escape, but we have found ourselves as far removed from satisfaction as ever.

We see, then, both the godly and ungodly man seeking for satisfaction ; we see both seeking for it in the future ; we hear each saying, *I shall be satisfied.* There is, however, this difference : the one expects to derive it from a created, the other from an uncreated source ; the one expects to realise it in the earthly future, the other only in the heavenly future. The godly man is convinced that this is not his rest, that he can never be satisfied with what this world contains, and yet he knows that he shall be satisfied.

But, it may be asked, though the godly man cannot be satisfied with the world—with anything that the world contains—cannot he attain to satisfaction in the enjoyment of his religion ? The answer is, *No.* It is not God's design that we should attain to satisfaction here. There is a measure of blessedness, and a large measure of blessedness, falling to our lot even here ; but the tendency of all our present spiritual enjoyments is to awaken and stimulate desire, rather than to secure satisfaction. God, when He spreads our table in the wilderness and in the very presence of our enemies, does not design to satisfy us, but only to refresh us. We cannot be too thankful for what we enjoy in the way of pilgrimage, but we must not forget that we are pilgrims. We must not be so taken up with the dawn as not to desire the day, with the first-fruits as to forget the harvest, with the earnest as to lose sight of

the inheritance. Every now and then we are ready to say with the disciples on the Mount, "It is good to be here, let us build tabernacles." But soon something occurs to unsettle us, and if at times we feel it to be good to be here, at other times we feel it to be better to depart, and we are ready to say—"Oh, that I had wings like a dove! for then would I fly away and be at rest."

We would not ignore the fact that we are here introduced to One who gives to us, and to all who seek it, a peace which the world can neither give nor take away. To-day, as of old, the Divine Redeemer is standing calmly amid all the tumult and confusion of the world, and, to those who have ears to hear, He is sounding forth the same gracious words of invitation: "Come unto Me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." But, notwithstanding this, it remains true that we shall be strangers to satisfaction till we reach the land promised to our fathers, and God gives us rest from all our enemies round about. It would be a sign of ill omen were we able to pause in any part of our earthly career and say, *Now I am satisfied!* I have done all that I have need to do; I have attained to all that I can desire. God is blessing us here very richly, but what is here given to us we should value, not merely for its intrinsic, but also for its prophetic worth. All that we now enjoy is both

a pledge and prophecy of what is in store for us. They that believe do enter into rest; but while they praise God for that, they praise Him yet more for the rest that remaineth. The godly man, whatever his lot in the present, is able to point to the future, and say, with sublime and unfaltering confidence, "*I shall be satisfied.*"

II. As we read on we find the prospect which cheered the mind of the Psalmist becomes more clear and distinct; it is not a mere vague, hazy anticipation. HE LOOKS FORWARD TO BEING SATISFIED AT A PARTICULAR AND WELL-DEFINED PERIOD. HE SAYS: I SHALL BE SATISFIED WHEN I AWAKE.

This is not the common, ordinary experience of men. They often awake from the vain and delusive dreams in which they here indulge, to suffer from the pangs of bitter disappointment, but not often to realise what even they would call satisfaction. They dream of satisfaction, and they awake to experience the craving hunger and the parching thirst of ungratified desire.

But the Psalmist here looks forward to the time when he shall awake from the sleep, the troubled, restless dream of life, to experience blissful and eternal satisfaction. Yes! though the vision he waits for tarry, he knows that it will come, and that the promised satisfaction, though it seem long delayed, shall be at last realised; he can say, *I shall be satisfied when I awake.*

We may take these words as referring to either or—which is, perhaps, better—to both of two things. There are two awakenings to which we may look forward: one immediately after death, another—a more complete and blessed awakening—at the resurrection.

Under a familiar, and, within certain limits, an appropriate similitude, we speak of death as a sleep. Death is "sleep's twin brother," and we can scarcely look upon one who lies unconscious in the still repose of death without saying or thinking, "After life's fitful fever, he sleeps well." Here we have that imagery reversed. Here we are invited to conceive of our life as a sleep and our death as an awakening. We cannot picture to ourselves "the moment after death." What will it be—the sleep of death ended—to awake in another world, and find our souls flooded with and transfigured in "that glory unimaginably bright"? Our conversion is appropriately spoken of as an awakening. Then are we for the first time roused from the slumber of our sin; then do our heavy eyelids, so long closed, yield to the influence of the marvellous light; then do we find ourselves in a new, and, at first it seems, a strange world. But, though in some degree awakened, our vision is not distinct—we see men as trees walking—we see as through a glass darkly—but still we see, we are awake, the powers of perception are restored.

We know how it is with those who are restored from blindness by an operation: they are kept in the dark, or in the dim twilight for a while, and, as their vision strengthens, the light is increased, until at last they are able to bear without injury the undimmed splendour of the day. So does God deal with us; He awakens us from our sleep, He restores to us our sight, and He grants us, while we live here, that moderated and wisely attempered light, which suits well the weakness of our restored vision, but by-and-by, and at the time which He sees to be the fittest, God will remove us from the dim twilight of earth and set us in the full glory of heaven. This change, which will take place at death, we may appropriately speak of as an awakening. We cannot describe the change, we cannot do more than vaguely imagine what is involved in it. Here, after we are awakened by God's grace, we are only half awake, the spirit of slumber retains a strong hold on us, the sedative and enfeebling influences to which we are exposed, are so many and so powerful that we find it very hard to keep awake. But then we shall be fully and for ever awakened, then shall we see face to face, and know even as we are known.

Besides and beyond this, there is another and more glorious awakening which we are encouraged to anticipate, the awakening of the resurrection. This is the great hope of God's Church. With-

out inquiring as to the degree of clearness with which this period was anticipated in Old Testament times, it is quite impossible to read the epistles of the New Testament, without seeing how wonderfully the hope of a joyful and glorious resurrection, inspired the members of the primitive Church with strength and courage. Their eyes were so full of the vision, and their hearts so full of the thought of this, the grand awakening, that all intervening events seemed to fade from their view. They felt that every end would be reached did they only "attain unto the resurrection of the dead." However great the blessedness realised by the redeemed immediately after death, we know that it will be greatly enhanced at the resurrection; until then our whole nature will not be complete, nor shall we know what salvation, in its fulness, is until the time of "the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body." Christ is the Redeemer of body, soul, and spirit, and in Him then will our whole nature be perfected, for, "when Christ who is our life shall appear, then shall we also appear with Him in glory." To this time of consummation do saints on earth, and the glorified spirits of the redeemed in heaven look on with longing desire. Then these bodies of our humiliation shall be changed and fashioned like unto the glorious body of our Lord; then will Christ have openly triumphed over all His foes, the last

enemy—death—having been destroyed; then will His redemptive work shine forth in all its completeness; and then will all the blessed results of that work be fully realised by His people. He will "come to be glorified in His saints, and admired in all them that believe." What a time of awakening will that be! *We shall be satisfied when we awake.*

III. We notice in the next place, that the Psalmist not only anticipates this satisfaction at a particular period, BUT TRACES IT UP TO A DEFINITE CAUSE—"I SHALL BE SATISFIED, WHEN IN RIGHTEOUSNESS I BEHOLD THY FACE, AND AWAKE WITH THY IMAGE." We have here reference to two things closely, inseparably connected—the *vision of God's face, the reflection of God's image.* I shall be satisfied, says David, when in righteousness, as one accounted and acknowledged righteous, I shall behold Thy face; and awaking to that perfect vision of Thyself, I shall find myself bearing Thy image. This, which was the hope of God's servant thousands of years ago, is, even yet more distinctly, the hope of God's Church today. We are looking forward to the time when we shall be satisfied—when, awaking in righteousness, we find ourselves gazing on God's face, and wearing His image.

We shall awake to the enjoyment of a clear, unimpeded vision of the Lord—we shall behold

His face. Here our knowledge of God is partial and indirect; we know but in part, we see but in a glass darkly; then shall we know even as we are known, and see Him whom we love face to face. We know in what way these sentiments find expression in New Testament phraseology. The vision of God unto which we shall attain will be the vision of God in Christ. He is the one medium of manifestation. No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him. He is the brightness of the Father's glory, and the express image of His person. He is the image of the invisible God: God manifested in the flesh. All that we know of God we know in Him, and this will, probably, always be the case. In that world of joy and brightness which we anticipate, the consummation of our blessedness will consist in a direct and immediate vision of our Divine and glorified Redeemer. No one will then say, Show us the Father, for all will feel that in looking upon the Son they see the Father also. Though we are now the children of God it doth not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when He shall appear we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. Yes, in this will consist the very climax and consummation of our being. Our life is now hid with Christ in God; but when Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then

shall we also appear with Him in glory. There will be a full discovery of all His glory and beauty on Christ's part—He will appear: He will be manifested. Just a passing glimpse of His glory has been afforded to a few of His more highly favoured servants—to the disciples who were with Him on the Holy Mount; to Stephen in the agony of martyrdom; to Saul on the Damascus road; to John in the Isle of Patmos; but *then* in His unveiled majesty and splendour He will appear—we shall see Him as He is. And, as there will be full discovery of all His glory and beauty on Christ's part, there will be clear and unimpeded vision on our part; we shall look with unfailing and unfaltering gaze upon His face.

The consequence of this looking upon His face, seeing Him as He is, will be the wearing of His image. In its degree it is so here, in the same proportion that we really see Christ, do we become like Christ. We all, reflecting as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are transformed into His likeness, from glory unto glory, even so by the Spirit of the Lord. If then the partial, but ever-brightening vision of Christ, to which we here attain, be followed by a partial, but ever-increasing resemblance to Him; may we not expect that to happen, which the Apostle John speaks of—"We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him

as He is"? Gazing upon His face we shall reflect His image.

Then—the conclusion is unavoidable—then, when we awake, when we stand in the glory of His presence, look upon the brightness of His face, and reflect clearly and distinctly His image, *we shall be satisfied.* We know not what this means; here we can only dream of satisfaction, there we shall realise it. Here, so far as we really see Christ, and attain to spiritual conformity to Him, we have not indeed that full satisfaction which will be ours hereafter, but what is to us the earnest and foretaste of it; and, from what we enjoy here, we feel quite sure that we shall be satisfied, when we awake in righteousness, to behold His face and to wear His image.

X.

Growth.

1 PETER ii. 2.

"As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the Word, that ye may grow thereby."

WHEREVER there is life there is growth. Throughout nature we see that where growth ceases decay commences. The moment anything desists from growing it begins to die. Man, physically considered, is subject to the operation of this law. If we look to man we see a gradual advance toward maturity: then what is apparently, but only apparently, a brief intermediate period; and then the certain, though perhaps slow, decline.

When we leave the consideration of man's material nature, and look to that which distinguishes and ennobles it, we see something different; we find that he is still, to a certain extent, subject to the same law of growth, while in many respects he transcends it.

Man is subject to the law of growth, mentally, morally, spiritually, as well as physically. But

mental, moral, spiritual growth, may be distinguished from physical growth in several particulars. To all physical, material development there is, as we have seen, a positively assigned limit, which cannot be transgressed; and the moment that limit is reached decay, decline commences. But to mental, moral, spiritual growth you can assign no such limit. Man contemplates an endless career; he is to grow, his faculties are to expand for ever; he will never have fulfilled his destiny, he will never have reached the end of his course.

Another difference to which we may refer, is this. In our material growth, our physical growth, the process goes on regularly, uninterruptedly, apart from any effort which we can or do put forth. We might expect this to be the case with the unconscious plant, the unintelligent animal; it is not less truly the case with ourselves. We grow whether we think of it or not —grow when we are asleep, and when we are awake. But in mental and moral growth we must put forth conscious, and, oftentimes, strenuous effort,—we must make diligent use of all appointed and appropriate means. This is equally true of spiritual growth; as some one has wisely though quaintly said, "No man ever yet became a saint in his sleep."

Before considering any of the ideas suggested by the analogy of growth, there is another dis-

tinction between the growth we are now contemplating, and bodily growth, which needs to be pointed out. In bodily growth there is the assimilation of what is external to ourselves—there is the appropriation of foreign material. The assimilated material becomes part of our bodily structure—is taken into close alliance—but still remains external to our true selves.

> "This frame, compacted with transcendent skill,
> Of moving joints obedient to my will;
> Nursed from the fruitful glebe, like yonder tree,
> Waxes and wastes,—I call it mine, not me.
> New matter still the mould'ring mass sustains;
> The mansion chang'd, the tenant still remains;
> And, from the fleeting stream repair'd by food,
> Distinct, as is the swimmer from the flood."

But it is not so with mental, moral, spiritual growth. We have indeed, to assimilate what is external to us, but in such a way that what is assimilated becomes veritably a part of ourselves. Do we gain a new idea, do we become possessed of a new truth? that becomes in some real sense a part of ourselves; it can be wrested from us by no creature power. This may be affirmed yet more emphatically of all moral and spiritual attainments; the issue of all such is the growth, the strengthening of ourselves.

If we turn to God's Word, we shall find many references to moral and spiritual growth, as an imperative duty, and an essential condition of

spiritual life; and however inadequately we may discharge the duty, however imperfectly we may realise the condition, there are probably but few of us who would question the force and urgency of the obligation. However slow and inharmonious may be the development of our moral and spiritual natures, we have all of us an abiding and irrepressible conviction *that we ought to grow.* We feel that if we are not growing there is something wrong with us.

It is our constant and sorrowful confession that we have not attained; and when we speak of non-attainment, we do not merely mean that we have not attained to "perfect manhood,"—to "the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ,"—but we mean that we have fallen sadly, and terribly short of that which, in the diligent employment of Divinely appointed means, and prayerful dependence on God's promised help, we might have attained unto. Let us, then, that our sense of responsibility in this matter may be quickened, look at the duty of Christian progress, as exhibited in this passage, under the figure of *growth*, noticing—

I. SOME OF THE IDEAS MORE OBVIOUSLY SUGGESTED BY THE ANALOGY OF GROWTH.

II. THE WAY IN WHICH, AND THE MEANS BY WHICH TRUE SPIRITUAL GROWTH IS TO BE PROMOTED.

I. *Let us consider* SOME OF THE IDEAS MORE

OBVIOUSLY SUGGESTED BY THE ANALOGY OF GROWTH. It need scarcely be said that we have here a figure of speech—a figure which, variously modified, is, in its simplicity and naturalness, more extensively employed in sacred Scripture than almost any other. We meet everywhere, both in the Old and New Testaments, with the idea of growth. Our present purpose, then, is not so much to consider the general subject of Christian advancement, but rather to inquire in what respects the development of the Divine life in the soul may be regarded as *growth.*

It is quite unquestionable that we are to attain to a certain moral and spiritual fitness, or meetness, ere we can enter upon the full possession and enjoyment of the heavenly life. We are to reach this consummation, so much to be desired, not all at once, but by slow degrees; we are to pass from one stage of progress to another. Here we have *a special mode or method* of advancement indicated. *We are to grow.*

We are not spoken of as a mass of crude, lifeless material, which is to be wrought into a given form by the application and operation of a power external to ourselves; but within us is a Divinely implanted principle of *life,* in virtue of which, and according to the laws of which, we are to *grow.* There is no representation of Christian life more significant than this, or more

suggestive of truths needful to be remembered by us. If our life be anything at all worth the having, it is *a growth—a Divine growth.*

In considering *growth*, we must start with the idea of *life*. We cannot grow in grace till we have grace. Growth implies the existence of life; it is the manifestation, the expression, the unfolding of life. We may plant a dry stick in the earth, and tend it, and water it with all care; but, though we lavish on it all our resources, and bestow upon it an amount of culture that no plant in the garden receives, it will be, after all, nothing more than a dry, dead stick. It does not live—it cannot grow. The first question of all, then, is this—*are we alive?* We have not to look to the artistic moulding of insensible and plastic material, but *the growth, the development, of a living principle.*

At this season of the year, if we watch material nature, we find ourselves on every side brought face to face with the great "mystery of growth." Under the genial influences which prevail, we see the bonds of winter—which for a time seemed to hold the forces of Nature in captivity—relax, and all

> "This leafless and uncoloured scene
> Flush into variety again."

By the wonderfulnefs of that process which is now going on around us, we should be much more powerfully affected if our minds had not

been rendered comparatively insensible by the deadening influence of familiarity. One of the most wonderful and familiar of all common things is that principle of growth which is now declaring itself in the pleasant green and luxuriant vegetation of spring-time—the mature results of which will, not many weeks hence, cover our fields with all the glory of gold. Men cast into the earth, apparently to perish, the hard, dry grain—perchance of wheat, or perchance some other grain —and after awhile it makes its appearance in a strangely altered and more beautiful form ; it bears fruit some thirty, some sixty, and some a hundred-fold. Who will explain this great mystery ? Who can estimate the infinite variety, the rich abundance by which the world, at this moment, is distinguished and rendered beautiful, in virtue of this principle of growth ?

Well, great and marvellous as are God's works in the material world, His works in the spiritual world are greater and more marvellous still. If we are partakers of the Divine life, there is going on within us a spiritual process, not less wonderful than that material process which is being carried on around us—which spiritual process may, on several accounts, be fitly spoken of as *growth.*

If Christian advancement may with any propriety be spoken of as *growth,* one idea is immediately and obviously suggested—*it must* be

continuous. However slow the advance, it must not be intermittent. This is one great difference between growth, and mechanical construction, or artistic creation. Is a man labouring at some machine?—is he building a house?—is he working at a picture or a statue? He may work to-day and rest to-morrow; he may leave his work for days or months, and resume it at the point where he ceased—and all without prejudice, or serious prejudice, to its ultimate completion. But let the growth of a plant be completely arrested for days—we do not say months—it withers, it rots, and the very influences which, if it were growing, would contribute to its growth, now contribute to its decay. If the process of growth be entirely arrested, the result cannot be merely negatively described. So of spiritual life: without growth it cannot be distinguished by the character of permanency. If there be no advance, there is retrogression. If there be not some measure of improvement, there is decline. Not only this, but every other portraiture of Christian life brings out the necessity of continual, uninterrmitted progress. "Onward, ever onward! Upward, ever upward!" is the Christian's motto. Forgetting the things which are behind, we must be reaching forward to those that are before. We must be ever growing, as trees by the watercourses—as plants in the garden of the Lord. If we do not grow, if growth be very noticeably

checked or hindered, we may be sure that there is something amiss with us.

When we think of *growth*, we think of *the proportionate development of every part of the entire plant or animal:* it is not the growth of this part or that part, but the proportionate and harmonious growth of all the parts—it is the unfolding of the entire nature. We know, of course, that many things may, and often do, interfere with growth, so that the results are inharmonious and disproportionate; but the idea we have of growth is that which we have expressed —the unimpeded development of the whole nature of a plant or animal. So should it be in spiritual growth: there should be the proportionate and harmonious development of the new nature. We should grow in grace, and in all the graces. We should abound more and more in faith and patience, in love and humility, and, indeed, in all that ought to distinguish and adorn Christian life. The Christian believer should, "giving all diligence, add to his faith virtue, and to virtue knowledge, and to knowledge temperance, and to temperance patience, and to patience godliness, and to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness charity. For if these things be in you and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Growth is evident in result, and in result only; the progress while real is imperceptible. If we take the instance of the most rapid vegetable growth with which we have acquaintance, looking at the plant, after a very short interval, we see that it has grown since we looked upon it last, but we do not feel able to say more than that we can *almost* see it grow. How beautifully is the idea of simple, silent, unostentatious advance towards perfection brought before us by this single word *growth!* There is regular, unresting, yet unhastening progression. "Consider," says our Divine Master, "consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they toil not, neither do they spin: and yet I say unto you, that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these." There is no fuss, no ostentation: *they grow.* Silently, simply, they develop into the things of beauty that they are, and shed abroad the fragrance that refuses to be hidden. They grow, not because we look upon them with eyes of admiration; nor do they sullenly cease from growing because we withdraw from them our admiring regard. In them we witness all the beautiful unconsciousness, and sweet simplicity of healthy life and growth.

We may, with much advantage, consider these flowers, and lay to heart the lessons which they, with their inarticulate eloquence, are ever teaching us. Well would it be for us did our lives

thus simply and harmoniously develop themselves! Happy should we be, were we able, like the flowers of the field, in quietness and simplicity to count all that befalls, whether light or darkness, shower or sunshine, summer warmth and calm, or cold and storm of winter, as designed of God to minister in various ways and degrees to our *growth.*

As we follow out in thought the suggestions of this analogy, we cannot overlook the fact, *that what we call growth is the simple and single result, the final and visible issue and outcome, of a mysterious concurrence and complication of means.* What an unfathomable mystery gathers around the growth of a single plant! We know something, but how little! The very phrases by which we express our little knowledge, serve but to veil our greater ignorance. We know that there is a minute and multifarious agency at work; but who will describe the mode of operation? Who will tell us how the various forms of grace and beauty which deck our world were curiously wrought in the lower parts of the earth? Who will tell us how the down of the peach, or the bloom of the plum, or the blossom of the wheat, is produced? Who, with all the aids of modern science, will explain the growth of a single spire of grass?

We know that what we look upon is the result of a complicated agency. That oak so

fantastically gnarled and twisted, presents us with a faithful register of all the material changes which have transpired around it, and affected it. Every bended branch, every twisted fibre, every variegated knot, has its own tale to tell. Had we the key to the cypher in which its history is written, we should learn how many things had contributed to the growth of that old giant of the forest. So is it with man; so it is with us. We at this moment present the results of the manifold influences to which we have been exposed ever since we have had a being. We may not be able to trace separate results to separate and special causes; but we cannot doubt, though we cannot define or measure their influence, that by all the infinite variety of earthly circumstances, we are always being impressed, either for good or harm. Many things are made to contribute to our spiritual growth—yea, all things are caused to work together for our good.

There is another idea suggested by this analogy: *that spiritual growth—as physical growth—may in the providence of God, be subserved by many things which seem but remotely allied, or not allied at all, to the nature which they help to build up.* By the strange chemistry of nature, all sorts of unlikely materials are put to the most unlikely uses. Discoveries made in this direction have given a distinguishing char-

acter to modern agriculture. It is just so in the moral and spiritual worlds—everything is turned to some account. We greatly mistake if we suppose that what are ordinarily regarded, and fitly enough spoken of as "the means of grace," are the only means of grace. Everything is a mean of grace, if we rightly regard and use it. Every duty, every form of business, every pleasure, every pain, all the petty annoyances and vexations of life—they perhaps as much as anything—every call for the exercise of benevolence, and every opportunity of showing self-sacrificing kindness, all these are means of grace and growth. Yes! in the spiritual world, as in the material, we see—as it seems to us—God putting unlikely things to unlikely uses; but while we may not be able to explain the process, we can rejoice in the result; all is well, whatever happens to us, if we can but feel that we are growing up into Christ in all things, and attaining, by however slow degrees, to the perfection of manhood in Him.

This suggests the one remaining point that we shall notice: *that all growth proceeds according to some pre-determined plan*—"every seed has its own body."

> "Lo! on each seed, within its slender rind,
> Life's golden threads in endless circles wind;
> Maze within maze the lucid webs are rolled,
> And as they burst the living flame unfold."

As in the Tabernacle everything was fashioned according to the pattern shown to Moses in the mount, so is this material world "God's thought in form;" and in the endless varieties of animal and vegetable growth, we see everything unfolding according to a pre-determined type or pattern.

It is just so with our spiritual growth: we are to attain unto the perfection of manhood in Christ—"unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ." We are "to grow up unto Him in all things, which is the head, even Christ; from whom the whole body, fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love."

Our growth, then, is according to a pre-determined type—a Divine pattern: "for whom He did foreknow He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren." True spiritual growth, then, is growth in Christ—is the growing up into Christ in all things.

II. Let us now remark upon THE WAY IN WHICH, AND THE MEANS BY WHICH TRUE SPIRITUAL GROWTH IS TO BE PROMOTED. The teaching of our text is very explicit: "as newborn babes" we are to "desire the sincere milk of the Word, that we may grow thereby."

It is not necessary to repeat what has been already stated, and what is so obviously true, that there must be life before there can be growth; and, if we would grow—spiritually—we must maintain continual, uninterrupted relation to Him who is the source of all true life. Separation from Him would be not only cessation of growth—it would be death; apart from Him, cut off from Him we are nothing—we have no life abiding in us. There is nothing that we need more carefully to remember than this—that if we are to grow, it must be by our maintaining a close, vital connection with the Lord Jesus, and this connection can only be maintained, by means of a diligent and prayerful use of the Word of God which testifies of Him. We must grow in knowledge, if we would grow in grace. And so the Apostle tells us here, that we are to desire the sincere, the uncorrupted milk of the Word, that we may grow thereby. It is assumed that we are already in possession of spiritual life; as new born babes, as those that have been born again, we have already tasted that the Lord is gracious. Now we are to be distinguished by our habitual and prevailing desire for "the sincere milk of the Word," and with this end in view, "that we may grow thereby."

All life is associated with an instinctive craving for those things which are necessary to its nourishment and up-building. The growing

plant reaches up towards the heavens, and down into the dark earth, that from all available sources it may derive whatever can minister to its development. So do we see associated with spiritual life a craving for spiritual nutriment; an appreciation of, and a desire to appropriate whatever can minister to its necessities. We are to desire this uncorrupted milk of the Word, because, as used by the Spirit of God, it will more than anything else contribute to our spiritual growth.

God provides His children with both *milk and meat;* all things necessary to life and godliness are given us richly to enjoy. God, having implanted spiritual life within us, surrounds us with everything necessary to the up-building and perfecting of that life. Physiologists tell us that the babe has in its mother's milk everything, and everything in the right proportion, which is necessary to the growth and development of its infantile nature—the formation of flesh and blood, of bone and brain. Just so God provides for His new-born children the sincere, the uncorrupted milk of the Word, as that which is most pleasant to the spiritual tastes of those who have been born from above, and that upon which they will thrive and grow.

This, then, seems the great idea which is here expressed—that in God's Word we shall find all that we need for the up-building and perfecting

of spiritual life. What does the babe want more than milk? What do we want more than the truth as it is in Jesus? Here have we milk for babes, and here also—though it is not here referred to—we have strong meat for strong men. Let us remember that our growth is very largely dependent on the use we make of the Word of God. Why is it there are some who are weak and sickly among us — some who do not grow? Is it not because they have lost their taste for the sincere milk of the Word?

We profess to believe that our lives can only be maintained in health and vigour as we commune with Christ. We can only commune with Him as He is made known to us in the Word. Let us, then, go to the Word which tells of Jesus, and seek the gracious and enlightening influence of that Spirit who alone can reveal Jesus to us.

Let us bear in mind that our spiritual growth means, practically, our growth in those graces which in the highest degree found expression in our Lord, and which in some degree, and some constantly augmenting degree, are to find expression in those who are His people. This result can only be reached by us, as we grow in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. This growth, though continuous, is not uniform: it is not to be measured by lapse of time, nor by enjoyment of privileges, nor by "frames

and feelings," nor by profession and activity. The one question is—Are we growing up into Christ in all things? Are we becoming conformed to the image of God's Son? MAY WE, AS NEW-BORN BABES, DESIRE THE SINCERE MILK OF THE WORD, THAT WE MAY GROW THEREBY!

XI.

The Cloud and the Glory.

EXODUS xvi. 10.

"*And, behold, the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud.*"

THERE are two evil tendencies against which we have reason to be on our guard. The one is an inordinate curiosity, which would lead us to inquire as to what does not concern us: the other an unnatural indifference which would lead us to neglect what does. There are many who are inclined curiously to inquire as to the character, duty, and destiny of others, who do not manifest an equal, or proportionate readiness to consider the practical problems of their own lives. There are those who busy themselves with inquiries as to the secret purposes of God; who spend but little time in seeking to ascertain what is His revealed will. It is the evident design of God in the Revelation He has given to us, to save us from the influence of both these tendencies. There is much to reprove and repress vain and morbid curiosity on

the one hand, and to awaken and reward humble and practical inquiry on the other. The way of life, the sphere of practical truth is luminous and intelligible; the outlying region of speculation is dark and inscrutable. All questions which relate to life and godliness receive an immediate and gracious reply; but there are many questions of an unpractical kind, suggested by the mysteries with which we are encompassed, which receive no reply at all, or only such a reply as rebukes the spirit of profitless curiosity which prompted them.

This being the case, we find that the Revelation which God has vouchsafed to us is distinguished by certain general features, which we should carefully note. Though it comes to us as a *revelation*, mystery forms a not unimportant part of God's Word—confessedly so—there is no attempt to keep it in the back ground, to distract men's attention from it; it is an acknowledged constituent of our religion. All who come to us as teachers sent from God, have the same thing to say, that they speak the wisdom of God in a mystery. Every doctrine of the Bible has its mysterious side, but especially does mystery gather round God. Yet are there partial rendings of the cloud, through which we get glimpses of the Divine glory, and are able, in part, to observe the procedure of the Divine will.

If we turn to our Bibles, we discover in nearly all references to God, a blending of light and darkness, of revelation and mystery. The light which, in its unmitigated intensity, would dazzle or blind, is, ordinarily, so attempered that it falls pleasantly on our eyes, and is available for the common uses of life. Yet, to God's favoured ones, have there been granted occasional manifestations of the more excellent glory, from which they have had to turn aside their faces, or before which they have fallen down as dead.

Deeply significant are all those sensible manifestations of the Divine presence, with which, at different periods, God's people have been favoured, presenting, as they have always done, that combination of light and darkness, of fire and cloud, to which we have referred. The guiding pillar of the Israelites was a pillar of cloud and fire. When God promulged the law from Sinai, the unbearable glory of Jehovah's presence was shrouded by the enveloping cloud. In the Tabernacle and the former Temple, in the holiest place of all, there was the cloud and the glory. In fact nearly always, as on the occasion referred to in our text, it may be said, that "the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud." This combination of glory and darkness, of fire and cloud, so frequently celebrated, fitly describes God—not in Himself—for He is light, and with Him is no darkness at all—but God in His rela-

tions to us, in the manifestations of Himself which He condescends to make to us.

These words, which describe what actually, and not unfrequently, occurred in the experience of God's ancient people, the Jews, may be taken as expressing in a general way the character of all Divine manifestations—"*the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud.*" Let us, then, try and seize the truth which underlies the symbolism of our text. God comes to us in a cloud: but not in a cloud which absolutely hides Him; not in a cloud which is darkly ominous of storm and tempest: it is a cloud which in some degree reveals to our view what it hides from it; the cloud becomes luminous and radiant, for the glory of the Lord appears in it. Just as, in our material heavens, a film of obscuring cloud enables us to perceive the position and form of the sun, upon the unveiled brightness of which we could not look; so, in those old times, could men look upon the glory of the Lord, its otherwise insufferable brightness being attempered and moderated by the cloud.

We have, then, two related facts to consider:—

I. THAT IN ALL GOD'S MANIFESTATIONS TO US AND DEALINGS WITH US, HE WILL COME TO US IN THE CLOUD—WHICH SPEAKS OF RESERVE—CONCEALMENT—MYSTERY.

II. THAT NOTWITHSTANDING THIS, THERE IS A PARTIAL, AND FOR US SUFFICIENT, REVE-

LATION, OF WHICH THE VERY CLOUD BECOMES THE MEDIUM, AS IT GROWS LUMINOUS AND RADIANT WITH THE GLORY OF THE LORD WHICH APPEARS THEREIN.

I. We have to notice THAT IN ALL GOD'S MANIFESTATIONS TO US AND DEALINGS WITH US, HE WILL COME TO US IN THE CLOUD—WHICH SPEAKS OF RESERVE, CONCEALMENT, MYSTERY. Everything has its obscure and apparent, its mysterious and intelligible, its Godward and man-ward side. To what can we point which is an exception to this rule, and which, however strongly illuminated on the one side, is not on the other clothed with impenetrable mystery? Let it, then, be understood by us that, save for God, who knoweth all things, and to whom all things are naked and open, the seen is as nothing to the unseen, the revealed but an inconsiderable fraction of the hidden.

This is evident if we regard *God in Himself.* God's existence is, of all facts, the most obvious. God's nature is, of all mysteries, the most inscrutable. Do we ask if there be a God? all nature is instantly vocal in reply, "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth His handiwork." "The invisible things of Him, from the creation of the world, are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead." But if, turning from the fact of

God's existence, we seek to comprehend the mysteries of His being, we are at once thrown back upon ourselves in utter impotence. And this ignorance is not incident to us alone, but must, in some measure, characterise all created intelligences. The finite cannot comprehend the infinite; the creature cannot be the measure of the Creator. Broad as is the interval which separates the lisping child from the mightiest of God's angels, they both agree in this, that in the presence of the great I AM, they have to confront questions which they are equally unable to answer—problems which they are equally powerless to solve. The idea of God is too vast for us. We become bewildered when we attempt to deal with it. We speak of the omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence — the eternity and immutability of God; but we feel, all the while, that we are using words unto the full meaning of which we are quite unable to attain. We cannot by searching, find out God; we cannot find out the Almighty to perfection. He comes to us in the cloud.

We see the same thing when we regard *the providential government of God.* The mystery which enshrouds the Divine nature, gathers, in a very large degree, around the general course and order of His providential dealings with the children of men. That "God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform," will be

freely admitted by all who recognise the Divine agency in the direction of worldly events; and the course of events which make up the world's history, will appear scarcely less mysterious to those who ignore the Divine government.

There are in this world sufficiently numerous and unequivocal indications of the fact, that there is a Divine order—a moral government; and, with many apparent exceptions, we are able to see that sin and misery, virtue and happiness, are bound together by ties which cannot be broken. Yet, how much is there hidden by the cloud! How much is there that, for the present, we cannot understand! What mysteries are there gathering around the very idea of a general and special providence! Who can form any sufficient idea of that great scheme which stretches from eternity to eternity, and which includes everything, from the most majestic to the most minute? How can we conceive of One who exercises a personal control over all things, and who, while regulating the movements of worlds, and determining the destinies of empires, regards the flight or the fall of the single sparrow, and numbers the very hairs of our heads?

Many of God's providential movements must appear dark and inexplicable to us because we are ignorant of His designs; and, in the great majority of cases, we need to know the end

proposed, that the means of attainment may appear intelligible. We, as soldiers in the world's great battle field, can only see what is transpiring immediately around us. We hear the confused roar of the raging conflict, the alternate cry of victory and defeat; now we are hurried tumultuously forward, and now swept back by some retiring wave, but what are the general arrangements of the field, what the relative positions, not of particular divisions, but of the entire hosts we know not, nor can we know. By-and-by, looking down upon things from a calmer region, and through a purer light, all will become intelligible to us, and we shall see that all the movements have been ordered by One as wise as He is powerful, and that from the first, notwithstanding many seeming reactions, there has been an uniform and increasing tendency towards an issue perfect and glorious. We are apt to regard ourselves, our country, our age, as the point in which all lines meet, and to which all events stand related; we forget that that which appears so large to us, is but an infinitesimal part of the great, all-embracing plan of God, which, however slowly, is surely advancing towards completion.

Who but by the event can see the working of God in history? Yet are we required to believe that all the actions of men are, in some very real sense, under the direction of Him

who worketh all things according to the counsel of His own will. We only see the human agents —the passions, the ambition, the selfishness of men seeking to compass their own ends. We see men resolutely set upon carrying out some design, accomplishing some purpose more or less worthy; but it is a part of our creed, that, by means of all these confused and apparently independent movements, God is working wisely and well.

Then, again, many of the providential arrangements of God must appear obscure to us, because He proceeds upon principles, which are often, very different from those upon which men ordinarily act. High as are the heavens above the earth, so are God's ways higher than our ways, and God's thoughts than our thoughts. We, losing sight of this, are apt to think of God as altogether such as we are, and so we set up a false or inadequate standard of judgment. We see error and sin in many instances triumphant; while, on the other hand, we may be called to witness virtue suffering, and truth despised; and it is a trouble to us that such things should be permitted. We still believe that God is good to Israel, and that He doeth all things well, but we cannot see, the cloud obscures our vision, and we can only say, looking up to Him who comes to us robed in mystery—"Clouds and darkness are round about Thee, but justice

and judgment are the establishment of Thy throne."

If we turn to *that revelation of His character and will which God has given us in His Word, we meet with many illustrations of the same truth.* We still move in a realm of mystery, and, while much has been disclosed to us, we are continually reminded that there is much which is hidden. We all know that God has not made an unreserved discovery of Himself to us. Even here He comes to us in the cloud. The revelation we enjoy, and for which we cannot be sufficiently thankful, is relative to our capacity and need. Every doctrine of the Bible has its dark and light, its intelligible and mysterious sides. All that has a practical bearing upon us, our direction in this world, our preparation for another—all that refers to life and godliness, is clear as though written with a pencil of light; but the other side—the side, which for the present is remote from us, that may be involved in absolute obscurity. Let us remember in our study of God's Word—and may the memory beget humility and reverence—that while the practical side of every doctrine is so plain, that the wayfaring man, though a fool, need not err, the other sides, with their far-reaching relations to a past and coming eternity, transcending altogether our finite powers of comprehension, may be wrapped in clouds and darkness.

Take, for instance, the great fact of the incarnation of our Saviour—that which, without controversy, is the great mystery of Godliness—God manifested in the flesh. Who can dwell in thought upon Christ's personality, the complexity of His nature, the fact that He comes as Jehovah's Fellow, and the suffering Servant of God—as Man, with all the sinless imperfections of human nature, and as God, with all the glorious attributes of the Divine—and not feel that many unanswerable questions at once start up?

Do we turn from the person to the work of Christ? Do we regard the doctrine of the atonement, the vicarious sufferings and sacrifice of our Divine Redeemer? While we can and do rejoice in the possession of the blessings of salvation, which come to us through the mediation of Christ; who is presumptuous enough to affirm that there is nothing in that work of Christ—in that plan of God—which surpasses his powers of comprehension?

Do we consider the influence of the Holy Spirit in the conversion and regeneration of the human soul? As we think of the secret and sovereign character of His agency, what can we do more than use the words of the Master—"The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh nor whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit"?

Then there is the doctrine of a future state and the resurrection of the body. While we are thankful for what we are told in God's Word in reference to these things, we cannot but be impressed by the fact that much more remains, and, in the nature of things, must, for the present, remain wrapt in impenetrable obscurity: The Apostle John, to whom, perhaps, a clearer revelation of the state of future blessedness was granted than has been vouchsafed to any mortal, could only say—"It doth not yet appear what we shall be."

As we call to mind the many things that are confessedly hard to be understood, we should carefully remember, that all the doctrines of God's Word are revealed, not as so many truths of speculative interest, but with the view of teaching an immediate lesson, and of exerting a present and thoroughly practical influence. Why, then, should we refuse to learn the lesson which is so plain, or submit to the influence which is so practical, because associated therewith are some things hard to be understood—things not opposed to reason, but, for the present, above its reach? We have here nothing more than we meet with everywhere else. We cannot go forth in any direction without encountering some insurmountable barrier. We cannot talk five minutes with an intelligent child without having some question started which a

synod of philosophers would be unable to answer. There is on every side of us a border-line of mystery which we cannot transgress. All our knowledge rests upon a basis of admitted, but incomprehensible facts. Our starting-point and our terminus are, alike, ignorance. In science we stop at some fact, which we discover as a fact, but cannot, in the meantime, explain. In religion we stop at some doctrine which is revealed as a fact, and which, for the present, is equally inexplicable. Whether, then, we look to nature, providence, or revelation, we feel that there is a sense in which God comes to us in a cloud.

II. We notice next, *that with all this reserve, concealment, mystery*, WE HAVE A PARTIAL, BUT, FOR US, SUFFICIENT REVELATION: THE GLORY OF THE LORD APPEARS IN THE CLOUD. As we look upon it, the cloud becomes luminous and radiant, and that which, at first, seemed only to exist to impede and limit our vision, becomes the medium of revealing what would otherwise have remained unknown. Have we not this expressed in the passage now under consideration—"The glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud"? It was that glory which was the symbol of Jehovah's presence as the God of Israel. This was manifested in connection with the cloud; this glory seems to have dwelt in the cloud, and to have shone forth through it, ren-

dering the cloud itself luminous; and so the cloud, by obscuring, softening down, the insufferable brightness of this Divine glory, rendered it visible. In that mysterious manifestation of blended fire and cloud, we see a form of revelation which was suited to the circumstances and necessities of God's people at that time.

The method of revelation is changed, but we still see God graciously meeting all the exigences of His people. With all the reserve, and apparent concealment of which we have been speaking, we have placed within our reach a revelation of the mind and will of God which completely meets our need. That revelation we have in the Bible, and we need not scruple to affirm, that whatever there may be in that Divinely inspired record, dark, mysterious, hard to be understood, we are therein told, and with sufficient plainness, all that we really need to know.

Of the many different ways in which the glory of the Lord appears in the cloud we cannot now speak particularly. The Bible affords us what is confessedly only a partial revelation, but we maintain that it is, for all practical purposes, a sufficient revelation. It is "a lamp unto our feet, and a light unto our path;" the design of that light is not strongly to illumine remote objects, with which we have no immediate concern, but to reveal to us the dangers and duties of daily life, and enable us to walk safely in that

way of righteousness which has been marked out for us.

We are told all that we need to know about God, His character, His will, His purposes, the course and order of His providence.

We are told all that we have any occasion to know about ourselves, our nature, our need, our destiny; and about that mystery of mysteries, the entrance of sin into the world, and the origin of moral evil.

And, besides all this, we have—which is the very burden of revelation—all necessary information, not only concerning the disease from which we suffer, but also that Divine remedy which will alone suffice to cure. Here have we spread before us the wonders of redeeming love; the great plan of human salvation. We learn how the law is magnified and made honourable, and how sinners condemned by the law are saved. There is, of course, much even here which is hard to be understood, much that we are quite powerless to explain. When we look upon the arrangements which Divine grace has made for man's restoration, and in which we are assured that God has abounded towards us in all wisdom and prudence, we can do little more than exclaim, with feelings of admiring gratitude, "Even so Father, for so it seemed good in Thy sight." Yet, while there are heights which we cannot scale, and depths which we cannot fathom, all

that we are really concerned in knowing we have set forth with absolute clearness. Nothing can be more plain than the testimony of Scripture as to the way of Salvation. "The righteousness which is of faith speaketh on this wise, say not in thine heart, who shall ascend into heaven? that is to bring Christ down from above; or, who shall descend into the deep? that is to bring Christ up again from the dead. But what saith it? the word is nigh thee even in thy mouth, and in thy heart, that is, the word of faith which we preach; that if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved." Surely here, no one who is willing to learn, need complain of obscurity.

May we not say that the glory of the Lord appears to us in the cloud—the voice of the Lord speaks to us out of the cloud; but the cloud, as it becomes bright and luminous with the indwelling glory, is to us the medium of revelation rather than the occasion of obscurity.

Interpreting the Old Testament in the light afforded by the New—we know who the glory of the Lord is—who is the true Shekinah; we know in whose person all glory meets. We think at once of our Divine Redeemer, who is the brightness of the Father's glory. He is the Revealer of all mysteries. He alone can open the closed and sealed book.

This subject should teach us the great lesson of humility and submission, should lead us to a patient and reverent study of the works, and ways, and Word of God. At first our out-look may be dark and cloudy; but if we wait for the vision, the glory of the Lord will appear. As we prosecute our inquiries, we shall find that we have all the light we need, and light which serves our purposes all the better, because it is softened down by the cloud in which it dwells, and through which it shines.

A note of warning is here sounded for those who are impenitent and unbelieving. One of the commonest grounds of practical infidelity is this, that there is no present display of God's power against sin, of such a kind as would warrant the expectation that God will finally visit the sinner, with the punishment threatened in His Word. Let it be remembered, however, that God in this world, comes to the sinner in a cloud which speaks of reserve, concealment, mystery; but as there is, at present, a hiding of God's power, by-and-by there will be a display of it, sufficiently terrible to convince those who now treat the denunciations of God's Word with mocking incredulity, that He is not slack concerning His promise, as some men count slackness. God is in the cloud: the wrath of God abideth on such; and let the sinner not forget that the cloud, which now only casts its shadow

upon him, has desolation and death hidden in its dark bosom ; and that the time is coming when the forces of destruction which are now held in check, shall be let loose, and then, in that day of terror, they only will be safe who are within the strong and sacred enclosure of that refuge, which God has provided for us in Christ Jesus.

XII.

Vain and Valuable Thoughts.

PSALM xciv. 11; JEREMIAH xxix. 11.

"*The Lord knoweth the thoughts of man, that they are vanity.*"

"*For I know the thoughts that I think towards you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end.*"

THE two Scriptures we have here quoted furnish us with material for meditation, which, if on the one side it be sad and painful, is on the other cheering and consolatory. We listen to the one utterance as to the voice of doom—"The Lord knoweth the thoughts of man, that they are vanity;" but, while cast down and sorrowful on account of this first announcement, the other reaches us as a Divine evangel, dispelling our gloom, and filling our otherwise desponding hearts with joy and gladness—"For I know the thoughts that I think towards you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end." The one

passage is to the other as the dark and stormy background across which the bow of the Divine covenant stretches itself, and against which it exhibits its prismatic splendour.

There is an absolute necessity for such a two-fold judgment as we have here expressed. It is the work of true religion to pull down before it builds up. There is much which must be razed, even to the foundations, ere a single stone of the new edifice can be laid. Man must be humbled ere he can be exalted; must be convinced of his own worthlessness and insufficiency ere he will resort to the mighty God for help; he must feel that his own thoughts are vain, ere he will esteem the Lord's thoughts as valuable. And so we find God's Word virtually resolving itself into two parts—the one showing to us, without any reserve, the dread consequences of sin, in which we are involved—pointing out, in what seems almost a hard and ungracious way, our ruin, degradation, and helplessness; the other presenting to us, in its glorious completeness and sufficiency, the Divine remedy for all the ills from which we suffer—the Divine plan for restoring us to the favour of God, and for restoring in us His image.

We have here, side by side, a very humiliating picture of human nature, and a very glorious declaration of God's merciful and gracious purposes concerning us. By One who cannot err

in the judgment He expresses, we have the thoughts of man and the thoughts of God characterized.

I. *We have first the deliberately expressed judgment of God concerning the thoughts of man*—"THE LORD KNOWETH THE THOUGHTS OF MAN, THAT THEY ARE VANITY." Man is here humbled in reference to that which is his boast, and touched, as with searching caustic, in his tenderest part. If anything could redeem man from the charge of vanity, we should have been inclined to say that it was his possession of the faculty of thought. It is the distinguishing honour of man that he can think. In the possession of this faculty he is separated from the inferior creation, and linked in fellowship with all the intelligences of God's universe. In the conscious possession of this, he rises superior to mere matter in its most stupendous and beautiful forms, and to the brute creation, with all their skill, and strength, and cunning. The world is filled with its memorable and well-nigh imperishable results, which show how largely man can make the things which seem most impracticable, obedient to his hand and subservient to his use. Yet, while we gladly recognise the fact that man is thus richly and rarely endowed, we have need to remember that this wondrous faculty is so perverted, so unworthily or insufficiently employed, that the God of

heaven and earth can pronounce this verdict—"The Lord knoweth the thoughts of man, that they are vanity."

One of the first ideas suggested by these words is, that none save God could pronounce this judgment, for the Lord alone knoweth the thoughts of men. It is the Divine prerogative to understand our thoughts afar off. How solemn is the fact, that "the Lord knoweth the thoughts of man!" We look upon a number of our fellow-creatures with whom we are more or less familiarly acquainted. We know their names, their residences, their occupations, something of their characters and dispositions, so far as they have been revealed by word, or look, or life; but their *thoughts*, who knoweth them? They lie beyond the reach of human scrutiny, human inquisition; they are robed in impenetrable mystery. We have some old-world stories of garments which possessed the strange power of rendering the wearers of them invisible. We are all endowed with means of self-concealment; we are all, to a large extent, invisible; our thoughts, which are ourselves, are unknown to others, save so far as, purposely or inadvertently, we allow them to become known.

> "Nor even the tenderest heart, and next our own,
> Knows half the reasons why we smile and sigh."

Hence is it that the thoughts of most men are worse than their lives and words. So soon as

any one acts or speaks, he subjects himself to the scrutiny, the criticism, the judgment of his fellow men, and so the manifold expressions of thought are modified by outward restraints, to which we are all, in some degree, subject. It is not so with our thoughts. They bid defiance to all outward restraint; they are "chartered libertines" as compared with our acts and words. That this is the case will appear from the circumstance, that men, the most reputable and exemplary in life and speech, would shrink utterly from the very idea of exposing their thoughts, without reserve or disguise, to the inspection of their fellow creatures.

> "If all the gentlest-hearted friends I know
> Concentred in one heart their gentleness,
> That still grew gentler, till its pulse was less
> For life than pity—I should yet be slow
> To bring my own heart nakedly below
> The palm of such a friend, that he should press
> Motive, condition, means, appliances,
> My false ideal joy, and fickle woe,
> Out full to light and knowledge."

Let us remember that these thoughts which shrink from human scrutiny, are all open to the notice—the sleepless regard of God. We are not left in doubt as to what God thinks of them. "The Lord knoweth the thoughts of man, that they are vanity." They are vain, empty, worthless, resultless, so far as the higher uses and ends of being are concerned. How much is there

in this judgment to humiliate us! By the Lord, Jehovah, our Creator, who knows us altogether, the thoughts of man are pronounced to be vanity. Some great thinkers have been subject at times to unfavourable and disparaging criticism, but they have been able to derive comfort from the conviction that the judgment pronounced upon them was unjust; they could leave their case for the decision of posterity, and confidently anticipate the period when the censure of ignorance and prejudice should give place to intelligent applause. We cannot hope for any such reversal of this judgment. From it there is no appeal. He who here speaks cannot err. He knows what the thoughts of men are; He knows equally well what they ought to be, and He delares that they are vanity.

We should have felt less surprise if the reference had been to the uncontrolled and well-nigh uncontrollable vagrancies of thought—its spontaneous activities—those semi-conscious movements which are always taking place. The mind is like an Æolian harp, played upon by all the winds of heaven. Every thing which transpires around us awakens some emotion, elicits some activity; and in the course of a single day innumerable thoughts skim over the surface of the mind, in reference to which we exercise scarcely any volition, feel scarcely any responsibility. But the allusion here is not to

mere intellectual vagrancy and dissipation, but to the deliberate exercises of thought, to all the schemes, plans, and purposes of men. Such is the perverting and depraving power of sin, that man, in the exercise of his noblest faculty, in his best estate, is pronounced to be altogether vanity.

It would have occasioned little wonder if a graver charge had been preferred against a certain class of thoughts, or the thoughts of a certain class of men. There are many thoughts so unquestionably, so unmistakably wicked, that they admit not of extenuation. We feel in reference to them that no words of reprobation can be too strong. Impious, rebellious, blasphemous thoughts—which are directed against God, and which are to be distinquished from those purposeless thoughts, which incontinently wander from Him. Malignant, rancorous, revengeful thoughts, marked by all envy and malevolence. Thoughts which are busy with schemes and purposes of wickedness, or which dwell in pleasant contemplation on those varied forms of evil, which are so continually to be met with in a world like this. Thoughts which are polluted and polluting, so corrupt, as to leave a foul stain as the memorial of their casual passage through the mind. Every one feels that thoughts like these deserve the strongest and most emphatic condemnation. But here we have a

charge of a different kind, which seems to lie against the entire sphere and range of human thought. "The Lord knoweth the thoughts of man that they are vanity." The idea being that they are vain, worthless, resultless, so far as the higher and nobler purposes of existence are concerned.

It should be carefully borne in mind by us, that thoughts may have a very considerable relative and present worth, and yet be chargeable with vanity, when judged of according to a higher standard, and viewed in relation to higher uses. There are many thoughts of men which have a present worth which we cannot but appreciate. Yet such thoughts, though they may have a very great amount of worth, when viewed in relation to this life, and the interests of this present world, may have no worth at all when viewed in reference to man's spiritual and eternal interests. Take all the most precious thoughts of men, thoughts which have their place—a place they will ever keep—among the world's costliest treasures, and which relate to all the varied departments of human knowledge—take such thoughts as these, and what do we see? We see much that has a present worth, which it would be worse than idle to deny—a worth which true religion does not teach us to disparage. Of these thoughts there are many which we reckon among the world's brightest and most

beautiful things; but they have no power to conserve or promote the eternal interests of man's being; and a man may have a great store of such thoughts as these, and yet find himself, as he awakens from this dream of life, nothing profited.

"If we trod the deeps of ocean, if we struck the stars in rising,
If we wrapped the globe intensely with one hot electric breath,
'Twere but power within our tether, no new spirit-power comprising;
And in life we were not greater men, nor bolder men in death."

We have a deep, and often painful conviction, that thoughts may have very rare worth and beauty in one sense, and yet be utterly vain in another—have worth in time, be valueless in eternity.

But besides these thoughts, which have a present and relative, though no religious and consequently no permanent worth, how many are the thoughts which do emphatically merit the appellation *vain!* If the thoughts of man could here be set in order before his face, how many are there which he himself would at once characterise as vain, worthless, contemptible! How large a measure of the reading and conversation of the day may be spoken of as utterly vain and profitless? What a growing impatience is manifested in reference to what is serious and unexciting! Some of our keenest observers, and deepest thinkers,—and regarding the matter

from a non-religious point of view—have dwelt in tones of regret and foreboding upon the growing frivolity of the age, as an element fraught with very serious mischief and danger. How many are there whose minds are receptacles of no other than vain thoughts, who never rise above the frivolous and trivial! Such thoughts are to be viewed as productive of harm: not merely as rendering more serious thought distasteful, but also as disqualifying the mind for its reception and entertainment.

Without attempting anything like a classification, let us consider, in a few instances, who are fairly chargeable with cherishing vain thoughts.

They are evidently obnoxious to this charge who allow their thoughts to dwell unduly, not to say exclusively, upon those things which are essentially insignificant and trifling. How many are there whose thoughts rarely, if ever transcend the most petty and sordid interests of life, and with whom the all-engrossing questions are, what shall we eat? what shall we drink? wherewithal shall we be clothed? The mistake into which such fall is the very common one of attaching an absolute and exaggerated value to those things which have only a temporary and relative importance. They forget that the life is more than meat, and the body than raiment, and that a man is nothing profited though he gain all the world and lose his own soul. What can

be more vain than this attempt of men to derive satisfaction from sources whence satisfaction never has been and never can be obtained? Yet all men, however manifold their occupations and pursuits, are really engaged in the same great quest. All are seeking happiness, all are going about the world asking the old, seldom answered question,—"Who will show us any good?" They fail because their thoughts go forth in a wrong direction, because they know not in what true blessedness consists, nor whence it may be obtained. Indulging a vain hope they go on unto the end, spending their money for that which is not bread, and their labour for that which satisfieth not. Is there any room for wonder that such thoughts as these should be characterised as *vain?*

And it will be observed that those who bestow unduly serious thought upon the trivialities of this world, bestow only a very trifling amount of thought upon the great realities of another. The minds and hearts of such seem so completely pre-occupied with thoughts as to the passing interests of time, as to have no room for considerations of eternity: they are so careful and troubled about the many things of this life, that they have no real or deep concern about the one thing needful. Well may the Divine verdict be solemnly recorded — "The Lord knoweth the thoughts of men, that they are vanity."

But the question here occurs — and it is by no means an unimportant one—Does this charge lie equally against those thoughts which man cherishes in reference to religion, and those great problems which rise up in connection with his spiritual and eternal interests?

What are the facts of the case so far as we can ascertain them? What are the thoughts which the unaided mind of man entertains in reference to religion? Confining attention to those forms of religion which may be regarded as the products of human thought, what do we discover? Do we not find the thoughts of men, as they have gone forth in these directions, are altogether vanity? Has man ever attained unto anything, of and by himself, in which he could rest, with which he could be satisfied? The world was, for the space of four thousand years, left, to a very large extent, to its own wit and wisdom, to its own thoughts and devices, and we know what the results were, in the case of Egypt and Babylon, Greece and Rome. We know that the world, in the exercise of its own wisdom, did not attain unto a knowledge of God. It is needless to refer to the condition of heathen lands in the present day. There are those who speak proudly of the possibilities of human nature; but "the Lord knoweth the thoughts of man, that they are vanity."

To a very terrible extent we can discern the same impress of vanity upon the thoughts of men in our own land of Bibles and religious privileges. How many vain, delusive, spiritually destructive thoughts are cherished by those who are living immediately around us!

There are but few who have not some religious thoughts, or, at least, some thoughts which stand to them in the stead of religion—or thoughts, it may be, which are designed to extinguish the religious instinct, or furnish an apology for the neglect of means appointed for the maintenance and culture of the religious life.

There are some, though not many, who have thoughts which are distinctly and expressly exclusive of God—atheistical thoughts. The fool says in his heart, says, believes, tries to persuade himself, that there is no God.

The religion of some is secularism—theoretical worldliness. The principle which such lay down, and according to which they profess to act, may be thus expressed:—Let us attend to the present, the claims of which are intelligible and urgent, and leave the future, whose claims are, at least, comparatively obscure and uncertain, to take care of itself.

There are those who seek to evade all sense of religious obligation and personal responsibility, resting on the vain persuasion that they are but as straws floating upon some mighty current,

victims of circumstances which they are powerless to control.

Thus, were it needful, we might go on, and bring under review a great deal of the so-called religious thought of this country; but we could only come to one conclusion. We see that the unaided thoughts of man are vanity; they can profit him nothing. Are there then no thoughts which will serve us? Are all those great problems with which man has vainly attempted to deal, in the exercise of his own unassisted reason, to remain for ever unsolved? Is the only certain knowledge unto which we can attain, that which is so eminently saddening and unsatisfactory, that the thoughts of man are vanity? No.

II. *The Lord, who pronounces our thoughts to be vanity, furnishes us with a very express testimony as to His thoughts concerning us*—"FOR I KNOW THE THOUGHTS THAT I THINK TOWARD YOU, SAITH THE LORD, THOUGHTS OF PEACE, AND NOT OF EVIL, TO GIVE YOU AN EXPECTED END. Our first impression, as we read these words is that, as God alone could pronounce authoritatively as to the character of man's thoughts, so God alone could declare what were his thoughts in reference to us. No one can "by searching find out God," or "find out the Almighty unto perfection." No man can by any investigation, however subtle and patient, discover the thoughts of God. "For My thoughts

are not as your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts."

Let us turn aside, then, from the imaginings of men to the testimony of Scripture, by which we are introduced to "the High and Lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy"; whom no man hath seen nor can see, and from the brightness of whose presence even the angels veil their faces with their wings. This is the God with whom we have to do, and of whom we should have known absolutely nothing had He not, in infinite mercy, condescended to make Himself known. He has bowed the heavens and come down to us. He has revealed to us much of His character and will. The Lord of All has enabled us to apprehend, in some large measure, His thoughts and ways. What an act of condescension is this, that the Infinite and Eternal God should make known unto us His *thoughts!* It is only by our apprehension of God's thoughts, as He has expressed them towards us, that we can attain to any knowledge of God's character. Our character is revealed by our thoughts—"As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he." We judge of our fellow-creatures by their thoughts, as they are spoken, written, or acted; and just so do we know God

by reference to His thoughts as they are variously expressed. We only know God through what He has *said* or *done*.

The world is "God's thought in form, God's will in action." "The heavens declare the glory of God, the firmament showeth His handiwork." "The invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead."

And, as we everywhere see something of God in creation, so, if we are wise to consider these things, we can scarcely fail of discovering some features of God's character as we look upon the course and order of Providence.

But it is in the written Word that we meet with those thoughts which should mainly interest us—thoughts which relate to us as sinners; thoughts which express God's feelings and purposes in reference to our position and prospects as such. How should we prize this book, when we regard it as a revelation of God's thoughts concerning us! If we have any matter of consequence in hand, how anxious are we to ascertain the thoughts, the opinions of those in whose wisdom and judgment we can confide, and, especially, the thoughts and opinions of any person or persons who are able to influence the determination of the matter! What would not the insolvent give to know the thoughts of his

creditors whom he shall presently meet? What would not the patient give for power clearly to read the thoughts of the physician who stands by his bed? What would not the criminal at the bar give to know the thoughts of the judge who shall sum up the evidence, and of the jury who shall pronounce the verdict? But here we have something of much greater importance. Here we have the thoughts of God, upon whom we are absolutely dependent—His thoughts concerning us. We have God's thoughts about sin and salvation, life and death, time and eternity; about all those grave realities with which we are concerned in reference to the life that now is, and that which is to come. How should we prize—with what intentness and diligence should we study—the volume which contains such thoughts as these!

But what should lead us to put a special value upon this revelation of God's thoughts is, that they are favourable towards us, "thoughts of peace, and not of evil." It is hard for us at first to believe this; the news seems too good to be true. The Jewish exiles to whom these words were originally addressed, must at times have been tempted to believe that God's thoughts towards them were of evil and not of peace. Had not the outward signs of His favour been withdrawn! Were they not dwelling in a strange land! Had they not reason to weep as they

remembered the desolations of Zion; or as they thought of their own captivity. Were they not compelled to acknowledge that heavy as their afflictions had been, they had not equalled their deserts! What ground could they have for anticipating that God would visit them in mercy! Yet to these poor captives who were weeping by the rivers of Babylon, hanging their harps upon the willows, and unable to sing the Lord's song in a strange land, this gracious announcement came—an announcemeut which must have filled them with a surprise verging on incredulity: "For I know the thoughts that I think towards you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you an expected end." It is just so with us. We might have expected a declaration of wrath, a revelation of fiery indignation; but instead of this we hear the still small voice of Divine love and mercy addressing us, "For I know the thoughts that I think towards you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you an expected end."

God seems to anticipate some difficulty of apprehension on our part. Some slowness of heart to believe the glad tidings of great joy; that doubt may be rendered difficult, if not impossible, we have the declaration made in the most distinct and emphatic manner. As God knows our thoughts to be vanity, so, with an equally certain knowledge, He can declare that

His thoughts concerning us are thoughts of peace and not of evil. In many places we have God anticipating man's incredulity. He reminds us that He can exercise such free and boundless grace because He is God. His forgiving love altogether surpasses the stretch of our thoughts and imagination because it is His. If we were looking for such an exercise of human forgiveness we might well have some doubt; but now we may dismiss all our fears and be still, knowing it is God with whom we have to do; and He tells us that high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are His thoughts above our thoughts. It is as though God said to us, "You may have your doubts and misgivings, but I know that my thoughts towards you are thoughts of peace and not of evil." "As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked! but that the wicked turn from his way and live."

What an illustration of all this did God furnish in His dealings with the Jewish nation, whose history serves as an abiding parable, to show forth the unfailing grace and untiring compassion of our God! But we have a more excellent commendation of God's love in the fact, "that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." Do we ever stand in doubt as to whether the thoughts of God towards us are thoughts of peace or of evil? The surest way of dispelling those doubts

and misgivings, is to remember that "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved." That we may not be high-minded, but fear, let us listen to the first voice of testimony: "The Lord knoweth the thoughts of man, that they are vanity." That we may not be unduly discouraged, let us listen to the second: "For I know the thoughts that I think towards you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you an expected end."